

## Election-2026: Ethiopia's Direction of Travel?

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**Abstract.** Ethiopia approaches the 1 June 2026 multi-dimensional general election with four interests it cannot afford to misplay: the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam as the engine of urbanisation and industrialisation, Red Sea sovereignty as a problem of self-defence before it is a problem of economics, broad-based economic development that lifts the rural and urban poor rather than only the connected few, and an internal unity that has now passed from rhetoric into existential category. The multi-dimensionally contested nature of the election requires a state that is institutionally credible at the bargaining table. The June election will not, by itself, produce such a state. Politically, the opposition is fractured by design and by the structural incompatibility of civic and ethnic political logics; the security situation in much of the country, mapped in unforgiving colour by the United Kingdom's own travel advisory, makes a free electoral contest impossible across large territories. Notwithstanding, the prime minister's return is, for practical purposes, certain. The interesting question is what direction the second mandate will take. Economically, this article reads that direction through the Asian mirror—asking whether Ethiopia is moving toward the disciplined developmental sequencing of Korea and China or the rentier state-capitalism of Malaysia—and through three concrete diagnostics: whether the poor are being asked to subsidise an emerging industrialist class, whether state monopoly is crowding out private competition, and whether political space is closing toward dictatorship. Anything of Ethiopia is by no means simple. Therefore, a further argument insists that the cohesion of Ethiopia is, in the first instance, a question of choices available to the prime minister himself. By governing as a national executive rather than as the patron of a faction, this article argues that Abiy could dissolve the recruiting environment in which insurgencies flourish. Through a genuine and credible federal offer that is committed to discharge the fundamental role of government — by providing security, maintaining law and order, protecting citizen rights, and managing public goods, Abiy could contribute towards the nation's unity. This is not a suggestion for leadership improvement but a genuine desire for the protection of citizens. The prime minister must also be acutely aware that reconstructing the armed forces on professional discipline and integrity instead of political foundations is vital. Otherwise, he may end up finding out that political loyalty without integrity is a sword aimed at the executive's own neck. This does not make the PM's task trivial. In fact, it is complex because what is contested at the ballot is not only democracy, freedom and economics but the very sovereignty, identity, history and survival of the nation. While I have extensively argued the historical foundations of the Red Sea claim as a self-defence imperative prior to its economic dimension, I deliberately excluded one subject that has been left to the footnote of contemporary Ethiopian political history - namely, the rebel movement silenced unionist voices of the Eritrean democratic spring of 1941–52, a subject that deserves attention when we talk about choice and election. If the identity and history of the nation is contested, it is worth including an exhibit on the medieval Ethiopian state under Amda Seyon that distinguishes historical observation from present-day citizenship in the federation. To bring home how much we have fallen from humanity's grace, despite what the prime minister tirelessly tried his level best to paint a nation on the ascendance through the corridor project, green legacy, industrialisation and agricultural productivity - and of course war and hunger, the quantitative annexes substantiate the insecurity and institutional troubles of our nation using FCDO, World Bank, IMF, and SWF-industry data. An exhibit within the FCDO annex sets out the compounding effect of contested demographic enumeration on electoral credibility and on the federation's structural treatment of dispersed communities. Some may question my argument - why bother about an election that I already claimed it will be won by Abiy? Of course, this is where our central problem is as a nation - and of course most other nations. We copy it without knowing and/or our politicians copy it for their pernicious ploy of "smoke and mirrors". We will not ensure democracy by running expensive elections alone. We need to do and sacrifice much more than that.

Elections must be as a result of a more foundational ideal and institutions on the way how people should truly govern themselves.

The article closes by arguing that the credibility of the election, and of the second mandate it will confer, depends now on choices that citizens, intellectuals, and the prime minister himself can still make in the weeks before 1 June and in the years after.

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## 1 The foundation: "It is the constitution, stupid"

Niall Ferguson, in his comparative essay on why British America converged with the modern world while Iberian America did not [31], makes an observation that is at once obvious and, in the contemporary Ethiopian conversation, almost completely missing. The difference between the two colonial trajectories, he contends, was not climate or geography or capital or even the religion of the conquerors. It was an idea about how people govern themselves. And the idea is not, as is often presumed, simply democracy. Ferguson is precise on this point: democracy was the *capstone* of an institutional edifice whose foundations were laid long before any election was held. At its base lay the rule of law—a principle whose substantive content is independent of any particular constitutional vocabulary, but which the English-Whig tradition articulated with unusual precision: the sanctity of individual freedom against arbitrary power, and the security of private property rights against arbitrary expropriation. Above those foundations sat the institutional architecture of representative constitutional government: parliaments that controlled taxation, courts that constrained executives, and statutes whose generality bound rulers and subjects alike. Only when those foundations and that architecture were in place did the franchise, extended progressively over generations, become democracy in the substantive sense. Confuse the capstone with the building, Ferguson warns, and you build nothing at all: you only hold elections in countries that are not yet republics.

The Ethiopian conversation has spent thirty-five years confusing the capstone with the building. Since 1991, every transition—the EPRDF's accession, the 2005 elections, the 2010 sweep, the 2015 sweep, the 2018 reforms, the 2021 vote conducted in partial war, and the 2026 contest now only three weeks away—has been framed as a question about elections. None has been framed, in the operative public conversation, as a question about whether the country has the foundations on which an election could be more than a ritual. The 1995 constitution that frames the present federation organises the polity not around individuals bearing rights against the state but around ethno-linguistic "Nations, Nationalities and Peoples" bearing collective entitlements within the state. Article 39 makes secession a constitutional right of ethnic groups; Article 8 vests sovereignty not in the people but in the "Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia." The individual citizen, in this architecture, is at all times a member of an ethnic group first, and an Ethiopian only to the extent that her ethnic group's relations with other ethnic groups permit. Her rights to property, to movement, to association, to political participation are not held against the state by virtue of her personhood; they are conferred upon her by virtue of her group's standing within the federation.

This is not a quibble. It is the foundation problem in Ferguson's exact sense. A political order in which the individual is a derivative entity, not a sovereign one, cannot supply the protections on which a democratic election depends, because the election itself becomes a contest between groups for control of the apparatus that confers and withdraws the rights the election is nominally supposed to be exercising. The architecture is recursive in the wrong direction. In every Ethiopian election since 1995, the substance of the contest has not been "which programme will best serve citizens whose rights are antecedently secure" but "which ethnic coalition will hold the apex from which the rights of citizens of other ethnic coalitions can be reduced." The rotation in 2018 changed the apex, not the architecture. The contest in 2026 will rotate the apex again, or fail to, but it will not change the architecture either, because the architecture is what the contest is about.

The objection that recovers the foundation does not require the abandonment of regional self-government, nor any particular administrative shape. The rule-of-law principle is content, not container; it travels in widely different administrative architectures so long as the unit of sovereignty is the person rather than the group. The United Kingdom devolves substantial legislative powers to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and recognises in those nations distinct linguistic, religious, and cultural traditions, yet a Scot in London or a Welsh-speaker in Belfast remains a UK citizen whose rights to property, expression, due process, and equality before the law derive from her personhood and the constitutional settlement that protects it—not from the standing of her nation within the union. Switzerland organises a single federation around twenty-six cantons of four official languages and historically two principal religions,

and entrusts to those cantons very wide autonomy over education, taxation, and policing; but Article 8 of the Swiss Federal Constitution makes equality before the law and non-discrimination obligations owed to the *individual*, and no canton holds communal sovereignty over the rights of those who reside within it. In neither case does devolution or federation place the group between the citizen and the constitution; in both cases, the constitution defends the citizen *also* against the group of which she is a member, and the group's recognised cultural standing is preserved precisely because the citizens who compose it are protected as individuals first.

Christopher Clapham, the British scholar whose work on the Ethiopian state has spanned half a century [32, 33, 34], has noted that the 1995 architecture is *novel* in the comparative-federal record: no successful federation has ever been built on the proposition that ethnicity is the foundational unit of political sovereignty, with constitutionally entrenched secession rights for ethnic groups. The novelty is not innovation; it is an experiment whose terms are structurally suicidal, because the architecture incentivises every ethnic political class to maximise its group's standing within the federation rather than to defend the federation against the next coalition's group claim. The corrective is not the abolition of regional or cultural self-expression—which the UK and Swiss models preserve generously and successfully—but the reordering of the foundation: the individual citizen restored as the unit of sovereignty, with rights protected against state and group alike. Genuinely secured individual freedom is the guarantor of group interest, not its competitor; the Scot, the Welshman, the Glarner, and the Romansh-speaker have their cultural inheritances protected *because* they are equal citizens first, not because their nations are sovereign over them.

**Is the constitution, stupid?** The 1992 Clinton campaign borrowed a slogan from political consultant James Carville: *It's the economy, stupid*. The slogan worked because it inverted the conventional question—which candidate is more virtuous, more presidential, more like the country's image of itself—and replaced it with a structural one: which candidate's analysis of the country's actual material condition was correct. The Ethiopian conversation needs a comparable inversion in 2026. The conventional question—which leader is more committed to democracy, more reformist, more like the diaspora's image of a worthy executive—has produced thirty-five years of disappointment, because the leaders who answer it well still find themselves governing a country whose constitution is structured to convert any reformist intention into the patronage of a faction. The structural question is the constitution. Until the constitution is reformed to make the individual the sovereign unit of the federation, with rights antecedent to and protected against any group claim, no executive of any disposition will be able to govern as a national executive rather than as the patron of a faction. The question this article has been asking throughout is the same question Carville asked in 1992, with a different noun: *Is the constitution, stupid?*

This is not an argument against holding the 1 June election. It is an argument about what the election is for. An election in a country whose constitution is structured around group rights is, at best, a means toward an aspiration its conduct cannot itself realise. The aspiration is the substantive democracy that obtains only when the individual citizen is the sovereign unit of the federation, when private property is secure against ethnic-political expropriation as well as against state expropriation, when the rule of law applies generally rather than communally, and when representative government exists to defend those foundations rather than to allocate the spoils of their absence. The election is one instrument among several by which the country can, decade by decade, build toward that aspiration. It is not the aspiration itself. To treat it as the aspiration is to invert the building Ferguson described: to insist on the capstone as if the foundations were already laid, when they are not.

The metaphor that should govern the second mandate is not the metaphor of restoration—a return to some prior moment when the country was supposedly closer to democracy than it is now, since no such moment exists in the federation's modern history—but the metaphor that the framers of the American republic used: the experiment of *a more perfect union*. The phrase is precise. It does not assert that the union is already perfect; it asserts that the union is to be perfected, by patient and accumulating work, on foundations that must themselves be repaired and extended as the work proceeds. Ethiopia's experiment in a more perfect union began, in some readings, with Ezana and Amde Tsion; in others with Tewodros; in others with the imperial reformers of the late nineteenth century; in still others with the post-Derg constitutional order of 1995. None of these readings is wholly right and none is wholly wrong. What is clear is that the experiment is not yet complete, and that the work of completing it cannot be

subcontracted to an electoral cycle. It must be undertaken as a generation-long project of constitutional repair, of which the 1 June ballot is a single, necessary, and insufficient instrument. The remainder of this article reads the present moment in that register: not as the moment of democracy's arrival, but as one moment in the longer experiment of building the country in which democracy would be possible.

## 2 Four interests, one foregone election

In a sequence of articles beginning with *The Spirit of Adwa Must Carry Ethiopia Through GERD and the RED SEA* [45] and continuing through four sequels on the Abraham Accords and the Red Sea–Horn corridor [46, 47, 48, 49], I have argued that Ethiopia's strategic position rests on four singular interests that cannot be traded against one another. The first is GERD, not as a monument but as the input infrastructure for an industrial economy and the urbanisation it must accommodate. The second is Red Sea sovereignty, understood as a self-defence question before it is a commercial one—knowing well that no land-locked state can build a serious manufacturing economy without secure access to international waters, and no African state can preserve its policy autonomy if its access depends on the goodwill of a single neighbour. In truth, sovereignty—and the self-defence it underwrites—trumps economics. The third is broad-based economic development that converts macroeconomic indicators into household livelihoods. The fourth, and the one that conditions the others, is internal unity, the pillar of our sovereignty, which has now passed from rhetoric into existential category: a country whose centre is contested by three armed movements simultaneously cannot defend the first three interests against any pressure worth the name.

Each of these four requires the same thing of the state: institutional credibility at the bargaining table. A state that cannot enforce its own constitutional boundaries cannot demand reciprocity from neighbours, the international community, or Nile-basin partners; a state that cannot administer a credible election cannot speak with continental authority on Pan-African matters; a state whose security forces operate outside accountable command cannot deter external coercion. Credibility is the currency. Everything else is denominated in it. The June 2026 election is the moment at which this currency will be stress-tested.

### Tesfahun Kebede: "Frash Adash" Comedy

The Ethiopian people have learnt to laugh at themselves, which is a novelty. In fact, Tesfahun Kebede is doing Abiy Ahmed a great service, because the prime minister is governing exactly as Tesfahun portrays the nation. Those who lament continue to lament, and remain static. Those who participate in the action progress—whether for better or for worse. Without pointless posturing, one fact about democracy and the rule of law is that once you elect your leaders, you are in a legal contract to be governed. You have given your elected government the *monopoly on the legal use of force to maintain order and protect citizens*, with the disputable caveat that the force must be proportionate and reasonable. We can therefore either continue to lament or join in and vote to make things better, even when the conditions are not conducive. Do not think about the bullet—think only about the next ballot. Use your vote carefully. Wasting your voting right wastes more than yourself: it wastes the nation, and it wastes the choice of everyone else who turned up. If every citizen thought this way, we would truly be on track to build a promising nation. Let us also not blame Abiy alone. We the people are the scaffolding that supported his system of governance—through elections, demonstrations, songs, and the #NoMore stupidity. He is doing both useful and harmful things, like everyone else. Let us learn from "Frash Adash" and hold up our mirrors, so that we may turn from passive lamenters into active builders. This does not mean we should stop telling the truth. On the contrary: action, and the change it imparts, speak much louder than words. Therefore, let's be a nation of builders instead: GERD-led urbanisation and industrial infrastructure, the recovery of our Red Sea sovereignty as a matter of self-defence and freedom, and our internal unity in diversity—denouncing the monkey-habit of ethnic entrepreneurship. This is timely and far more important for a nation in which **nearly two-thirds of the population (about 86 million) is under thirty years of age**. Think about it for a few minutes. It is not only the vote we cannot afford to waste; it is this invaluable generation, which must be trained and skilled to drive all of the above, rather than left to become a security and economic liability to the nation.

Vote with courage and fortitude.

Forty-seven political parties have registered some 10,934 candidates between them, of which 2,198 contest the federal House of People's Representatives (whose 547 single-member constituencies will return

its membership) and the remainder the regional councils. Just over fifty million voters were registered by 22 April, the close of the extended registration period; some 5.5 million of them, or approximately 11%, were registered through the new *Mirchaye* digital platform. The Board reported deploying more than 187,000 electoral officials, distributing materials to roughly forty-five thousand polling stations [2]. The administrative scaffolding is in place. The political contest, in the sense in which a contest implies an open question about its outcome, is not. The Prosperity Party will return, by margins which will be reported, contested in the foreign press, and accepted in fact. Some surprise local victories are possible—in particular constituencies where civic and ethnic candidates have built unusual coalitions, or where the incumbent’s local performance has been particularly poor—and these possibilities deserve to be defended with vigour. But they do not aggregate into a national alternative.

This article is therefore not about the result. It is about the conditions under which the result will be produced and the direction the second mandate will take. The conditions are well summarised by a single artefact, to which I now turn.

### 3 The map that tells the truth

The most honest political document in circulation about Ethiopia at present is not produced in Addis Ababa, in any opposition headquarters, or in any partisan publication. It is the United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office’s Travel Advisory map, Edition 42, dated February 2026 [1], reproduced as Figure 1 below. It is intended for the prosaic purpose of guiding British nationals on where they may safely visit. As a security X-ray of the country, it is more candid than any internal document the federal government has published, because its only audience is people who do not care about partisan framings and only want to know whether they will live to return home.

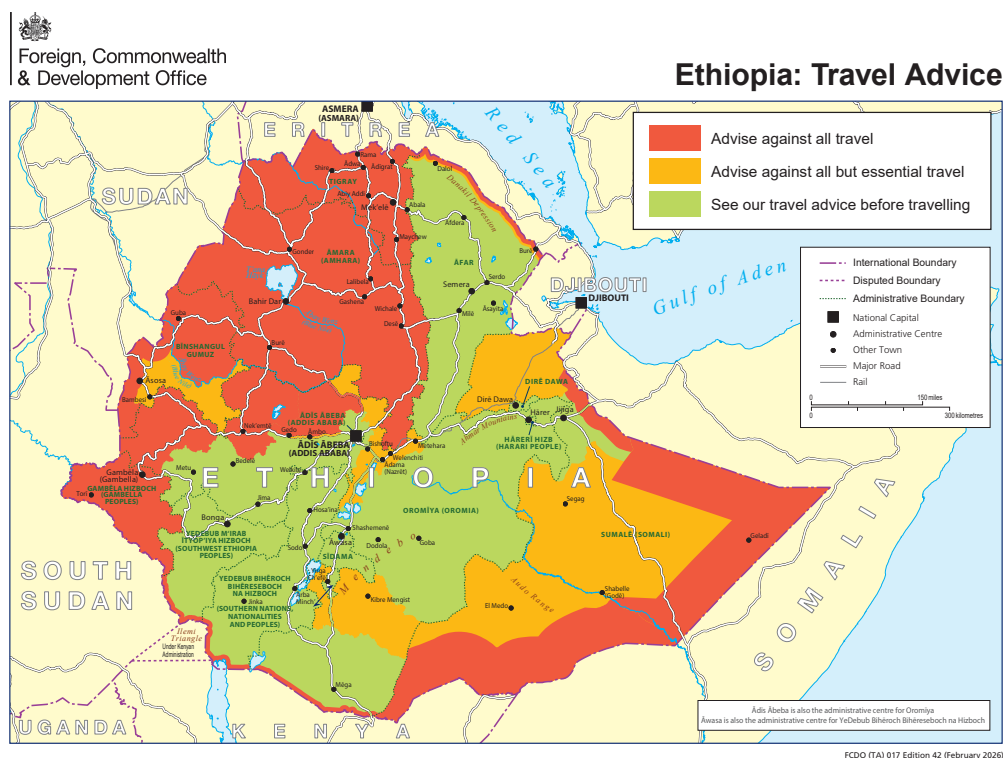


Figure 1: FCDO Ethiopia Travel Advice, Edition 42 (February 2026). Red = advise against all travel; orange = advise against all but essential travel; green = see travel advice before travelling. Source: [1], Crown Copyright 2026, reproduced for analytical purposes.

The map, interestingly, shades Ethiopia in our usual emblematic trio-colours but with a very different meaning. Red is “advise against all travel.” Orange/yellow is “advise against all but essential travel.” Green is “see travel advice before travelling.” On Edition 42, red covers the entirety of Tigray; the great majority of Amhara, including Gondar, Bahir-Dar, Lalibela, Gashena, Dessie, and Bure; all of Benishangul-Gumuz, including Asosa, Bambesi, and Guba; almost all of Gambella; the western fringe of Oromia from Nekemte through Bedele to Metu and Gedo; and a southern band along the Kenyan border around Mega. Orange covers most of the Somali Region from Jijiga through Segag to Gode and Geladi; substantial parts of Afar, including Asayita, Serdo, and the strategic Mile node on the Djibouti corridor; portions of southern Oromia around Goba and Dodola; and the Dire Dawa and Harari areas. Green—meaning, in the FCDO’s careful phrasing, that travellers should consult the advisory before going—covers Addis Ababa, central Oromia from Adama through Bishoftu to Welkite, Sidama around Hawassa, the south-western band through Hosaeina and Jimma down to Bonga and Arba-Minch, and the South region.

The map is not propaganda. The FCDO does not issue red advisories for political effect; it does so when its consular and security assessments judge that the risk to a British national of being kidnapped, killed, or caught in active combat is unacceptable.

The pattern on the page is, almost exactly, the pattern of armed conflict that the country has been carrying through 2020 and into 2026. Tigray is red because the federal government and the Tigrayan authorities have come within weeks of resumed war as recently as February of this year, with the Ethiopian National Defence Force amassing tanks and heavy artillery along the border in response to Tigrayan operations into disputed areas [3]. TPLF is doing a pointless posturing unless serving as a vassal for Afeworki’s pernicious ploy. Amhara is red because the Fano insurgency, now into its third year, conducts active operations in twenty-three or more woredas across twelve zones in any given week [4]. This is without forgetting the larger organised Fano groups, who couldn’t unite on any purpose, and those bandit groups who rob the poor in the name of Fano with much grandstanding with Kalashnikovs and little resistance to protect the people. Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella are red because the periphery security has not been functional for years. Western Oromia is red because the Oromo Liberation Army insurgency, a group mainly funded and directed by insider OPDO and ENDF officials, is nothing but a massacre squad for minorities in Oromia region - mainly Amhara but also Tigrayans and Guraghes. As Africa Practice analysts have noted, these conflicts will cross the eight-year mark in April 2026 with no political resolution in sight [5]. The Somali Region is orange because of inter-communal violence and the persistent drought-and-displacement complex along the eastern border. The Afar nodes are orange because the Djibouti corridor, on which Ethiopia’s entire import-export logistics depend, is itself a contested terrain.

**The headline number.** Cross-referencing FCDO Edition 42 against the Ethiopian Statistical Service 2024 regional population estimates, approximately one in three Ethiopians—some thirty-seven million people—lives in territory the UK government considers too dangerous for any travel; another 11% live under the orange “essential travel only” designation. Combined, the population that lives under FCDO security restriction more demanding than “standard caution” approaches 45% of the country. The full breakdown is presented in Annex A.

The question I would like to put to the reader is that —is the country “burning” or is such a language exaggeration?. This can now be answered with the sobriety the question deserves. “Burning” is the wrong metaphor because it implies a single fire. The accurate description is that the country is carrying multiple active conflicts whose geographic scale has been mapped, by an agency with no axe to grind, across a majority of its territory. By population the green zone is larger than its area suggests, because it contains Addis Ababa and the Oromia heartland; by area, the country in which a citizen can travel, campaign, register voters, count ballots, and contest a result is a minority of the country in whose name the election will be conducted.

### 3.1 The geography of peace, and the politics it discloses

The colour pattern on Edition 42 is, in the first instance, a security map. It is also, on a longer reading, a political one, and an honest reading of the political dimension cannot be deferred to a later section without the article forfeiting one of its principal observations. The green zone—the territory in which a citizen of the federation can in 2026 travel, campaign, register voters and contest a result without unacceptable risk—traces, with very few exceptions, the demographic and political base of the present governing coalition: central Oromia from Adama through Bishoftu to Welkite; the Sidama, Southwest, and South regions, in which the Prosperity Party’s regional affiliates govern without active armed challenge; and the constitutionally chartered city of Addis Ababa. The red zone traces, again with very few exceptions, the territories whose principal political actors are either delegatised (the TPLF in Tigray), structurally excluded from the federal coalition (the Fano constellation in Amhara), administratively subordinate (Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella), or the periphery whose security problems the federal state has historically subcontracted to whoever could keep order at the lowest political cost (parts of the Somali Region, Afar’s eastern fringe). The map is not deliberately drawn in this pattern by any single actor, but the pattern is unambiguous, and to leave it unremarked would be a failure of analytic honesty.

I want to make this observation carefully, because three readings of it are tempting and each is wrong. The first wrong reading is that the federal government has deliberately purchased peace in Oromia by ceding the rest of the country—the corollary, in some Amhara and Tigrayan diaspora commentary, that the prime minister is uniquely an “Oromo executive” presiding over the rest of the federation as occupied territory. This reading is wrong on the evidence: Western Oromia from Nekemte through Bedele to Metu and Gedo is itself red, the OLA insurgency persists into its eighth year, the Wollegas have produced civilian casualty counts that no honest Oromo voice could call peace, and the inter-communal violence in the Somali–Oromo border belt is mapped in orange precisely because the federal architecture has not delivered safety to Oromo communities living there either. Oromia itself is not uniformly green; the green parts of Oromia are the parts in which the OPDO/Prosperity coalition’s institutional reach is densest, not the parts in which Oromo identity per se confers protection.

The second wrong reading is the inverse: that because the green–red asymmetry is not absolute, it can be treated as analytically incidental. This is the reading that the federal coalition’s defenders have been tempted toward, and it is wrong because the asymmetry, even after correction for the Wollegas and the Somali border, is still there at an order-of-magnitude scale. Approximately five-sixths of Oromia by area, and the federal capital that sits inside it, lie in the green band; of the four next-largest national communities by population—Amhara, Tigrayan, Somali, and Sidama—only the Sidama, who occupy a region that did not exist before 2020 and whose territorial extent is among the smallest in the federation, sit predominantly in green. To dismiss this asymmetry as incidental would be to misread the map.

The third wrong reading—the most dangerous, because it has constituencies in both directions of the present polarisation—is that the asymmetry must be *redressed* in the strict sense of equalising the suffering, by extending insecurity from Amhara and Tigray into Oromia until the whole map turns red together. This is a counsel of nihilism with a constituency, and it should be named for what it is. The federation’s interest is not in the levelling-down of safety to a common denominator of armed contestation; the federation’s interest is in the levelling-up of the green zone until it covers every region of the country, including the parts of Oromia that are presently red. The four singular interests of this article all rest on that levelling-up; none of them is served by the levelling-down.

What the asymmetry does disclose, honestly read, is the political stake. A federation in which one region of the country can register voters, conduct campaigns, and operate civil society while the others cannot is a federation in which peace is being delivered as a regional good rather than as a federal one. That distribution may be defended in the short term as a function of which regional security architecture happens to be working at a given moment; it cannot be defended in the medium term as the operating logic of a federation that aspires to civic, rather than ethnic, citizenship. A peace that obtains in one region only because the federal coalition’s regional patron is in office there, and that does not extend to other regions because the federal coalition has no comparable patron there, is a peace

whose maintenance depends on the patron's continued usefulness to the coalition. The day the patron is no longer useful—the day the next ethnic-entrepreneurial coalition begins to assemble itself—the green zone shifts, and yesterday's green zones become tomorrow's contested territories. The Ethiopian political class has watched this mechanism operate twice in living memory: in 1991, when Tigrayan ascendancy made Tigray the protected core and the rest of the country contested; and in 2018, when the rotation to an Oromo-led coalition restructured the protected zone again. There is no principled reason to believe the third iteration will be more peaceful than the first two; there is every reason, drawn from the same record, to believe it will be less so, because each iteration consumes more of the federation's residual institutional capacity.

This is the dimension in which the green zone of Edition 42 is a warning rather than a comfort. Oromo citizens, no less than Amhara, Tigrayan, Somali, or southern citizens, have a direct stake in dissolving the architecture by which they are presently the apparent beneficiaries of a coalition's hold on the apex of the federal state. That apparent beneficence is conditional on the coalition; the coalition's historical record is short; and the cost of being the patron's home community when the rotation comes will, on the available evidence, be borne not by the patron but by the community whose name the patron invoked. The protective edge that runs along the borders of central Oromia today does not protect the Oromo people; it protects the OPDO-PP architecture for as long as it remains in office. The same observation, made in different vocabularies, can be made of every regional ruling formation that has ever held the apex of the federation. The monkey-habit of fighting over crumbs at the top table is, in the first instance, dangerous to those whose names are inscribed on the table at the moment the fight begins. The argument I have been making throughout this article—that the cohesion pledge of Section 9 is in the prime minister's own interest before it is in anyone else's—rests, in this dimension, on an Oromo interest in particular: the interest of an Oromo political class in being the architects of a federation that survives them as Ethiopians, rather than the patrons of an asymmetric peace that ends with them as Oromo. If the federation cannot be defended on civic foundations from the apex it has presently reached, it will not be defensible from any apex any community holds in the future.

## 4 The election as security exam

This map has direct implications for the election that has been promised on 1 June. The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) published, in early 2026, its own assessment in which the great majority of constituencies were judged ready for voting. Opposition parties contested the assessment, pointing out that they had been unable to field candidates or conduct campaigns in many of the constituencies the Board had coloured as safe [6]. In late March, NEBE belatedly announced a security task force, comprising party representatives, civil-society observers, and election monitors, to assess conditions in regions of heightened risk and recommend mitigations. The task force was scheduled to begin work less than two months before polling day.

Two structural problems compound the security one. The first is the question of the disputed Tigray-Amhara territories. Five districts in areas claimed by both regions have been excluded from regional council elections after the Federal High Court, on 13 March 2026, lifted an injunction that had previously prevented their exclusion [7]. The exclusion is administratively rational—without resolved territorial status, no party can credibly compete—but it is a constitutional warning. A federation that cannot conduct elections in territories whose status it has not settled is a federation in which the territorial question has been deferred at the cost of the democratic one.

The second is the legacy of 2021. The seventh general election will be the second under the Prosperity Party's reorganisation; the sixth, in 2021, took place under conditions of partial war and produced a House of People's Representatives in which something on the order of one-fifth of seats remained vacant because elections could not be held in the affected constituencies. Africa Practice analysts have warned, plausibly, that the 2026 vote risks being a turbulent replay at higher stakes [5]. The lesson of 2021 was not learned: a vote can be administered without first being made possible.

The credibility of the June 2026 result will therefore hinge less on what happens at polling stations and more on what has happened, or has not happened, in the months before. If the population breakdown in Annex A is even approximately correct, then on the order of two hundred and forty-five federal constituencies—roughly 45% of the 547-seat House—sit in territories under FCDO red or orange advisory. In how many of them could opposition parties register and campaign? In how many were candidates harassed, arrested, or denied premises? In how many were the rolls credibly compiled? Where regional administrations have prevented opposition activity, has the federal Election Board recorded the obstruction or accepted it? The figures that will matter most are not the percentages on the night of 1 June but the audit of the campaign that preceded it. To this geographic exclusion the demographic dimension must be added: where the count itself is contested—as the work of Berhanu Abegaz and others has shown for several Ethiopian communities—the formula by which votes become parliamentary seats inherits the contestation. Exhibit A.1 within the FCDO annex sets this out in detail [50].

This is not a counsel of despair. It is the basis on which the election can still be made meaningful. The campaign window closes on 27 May. The weeks before polling day are weeks in which voters can still be educated, observers can still be deployed, and candidates can still campaign in the territories where campaigning is possible. The opposition's fragmentation cannot be undone in three weeks; the opposition's effort can be intensified in three weeks. A diaspora that has spent more on amplifying grievance than on funding observers might consider where its remaining political capital is most usefully spent.

## 5 The Asian mirror

The interesting question, beyond the election, is the direction of travel of the second mandate. Here the comparative literature on the East Asian developmental states is genuinely instructive, and it has been invoked, in different registers, by both supporters and critics of the prime minister. There is vast amount of literature on the Asian Dragons, and the account of the post-war North-East Asian success cases identifies three sequenced policies that distinguished the converging economies from the stalled ones: smallholder land productivity through tenure reform and household-scale farming; manufacturing growth disciplined by export performance, in which subsidy and protection were conditional on hitting world-market benchmarks; and financial repression that channelled household savings into long-gestation industrial investment rather than consumption or speculation [30]. The political wrappings varied—Park's authoritarianism in Korea, the KMT's one-party state in Taiwan, MITI's parliamentary technocracy in Japan—but the disciplinary content was consistent. The South-East Asian cases, particularly Malaysia and the pre-1997 Philippines, replicated some of the surface features of the model without the disciplinary substance: industrial policy without export benchmarks, state firms without performance accountability, capital liberalisation before manufacturing capability. They grew, sometimes rapidly, and they did not converge. There is a tremendous lesson for Abiy's burgeoning effort to industrialise and to invest, which must be disciplined with the objectives of efficiency and the key results of export benchmark and performance accountability in state firms.

### 5.1 Singapore versus Malaysia: two state-holding companies, two outcomes

The instructive comparison is not between Korea and Ethiopia, because Park-era Korea built private chaebols disciplined by state credit, whereas Abiy's Ethiopia is building a sovereign holding company that owns the firms directly. The comparison that matters is therefore between Singapore's Temasek and Malaysia's Khazanah, the two East-Asian holdings whose architecture Brook Taye has openly cited as Ethiopian Investment Holdings' (EIH) reference points [9, 10]. Both were created by post-colonial states with similar authoritarian-developmental ambitions; both held the major state-owned enterprises (SOEs) of their respective economies; both were chaired, at various points, by serving prime ministers. Their trajectories diverged sharply, and the divergence is instructive for the institution Ethiopia is now building.

Temasek was established in 1974 with a clear separation between government and commercial management. It is wholly owned by the Singapore Ministry of Finance, but its board is independent, its CEO is a career professional appointed without political proximity to the Prime Minister, and—constitutionally critical—its drawdowns of past reserves require the approval of the elected President of Singapore, advised by an independent Council of Presidential Advisers [14]. Past reserves are constitutionally protected; they cannot be touched by an executive who happens to be in office. Temasek publishes annual financial statements with subsidiary-level transparency, voluntarily exceeds the Santiago Principles for sovereign wealth fund disclosure, and holds an Aaa/AAA credit rating from both Moody's and Standard & Poor's. Its compounded annualised total shareholder return since inception in 1974 is 14% in Singapore dollar terms, or 17% in US dollar terms, over fifty years; the twenty-year figure is 7% and the ten-year figure 6% [15]. Its portfolio value is approximately 434B Singapore dollars (approximately 324B US dollars). As of March 31, 2026, Temasek net portfolio value reached a record high increase of 11% (or 45B Singapore dollars) from the previous year.

Malaysia's Khazanah, established in 1993, was nominally modelled on Temasek but was deployed under a different political logic. Its mandate combined commercial returns with the Bumiputera ethnic-redistribution agenda, which has meant that political and ethnic considerations were embedded in its investment decisions from inception [19]. The chairmanship of its board has been politically determined: Khazanah was moved between the Ministry of Finance and the Prime Minister's Department under successive governments, with its strategic priorities shifting accordingly. The 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal, in which a parallel state-investment vehicle established by then-Prime Minister Najib Razak was used to embezzle approximately 4.5B US dollars, exposed the wider failure mode of Malaysian state-investment governance: weak board independence, opaque consolidated reporting that obscured subsidiary-level transactions, and the absence of constitutional safeguards capable of restraining a determined executive [17]. Khazanah itself was used, in 2016–17, to pay approximately one and two-thirds billion US dollars in 1MDB debt service obligations [18], an episode that crystallised the cost of an SOE-holding architecture without the Singaporean discipline. Khazanah's net assets at the time of the scandal stood at approximately one hundred and ten billion ringgit (around twenty-six billion US dollars), an order of magnitude smaller than Temasek's despite Malaysia's larger population and economy.

The comparative table presented in Annex B sets out the structural variables side by side. The conclusion is straightforward: an SOE holding architecture is a powerful instrument that produces qualitatively different outcomes depending on three governance variables—the constitutional protection of fund assets from executive draw-down, the independence of the board from the prime minister, and the transparency of subsidiary-level financial reporting. Singapore's Temasek meets all three; Malaysia's Khazanah meets none of them robustly.

## 5.2 Where does Ethiopian Investment Holdings sit?

EIH was established by Council of Ministers Regulation No. 487/2022 and formally inaugurated on 31 January 2022 [11]. By April 2026 its portfolio comprises approximately forty SOEs, including Ethiopian Airlines (Africa's most profitable airline by an order of magnitude), Ethio Telecom, the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, Ethiopian Shipping and Logistics, the sugar corporation, the railway, the industrial parks, and the cluster of corporations transferred from the former Public Enterprises Holding and Administration in December 2024. Its assets under management have been variously reported as approximately forty-five billion US dollars (a market-value-aligned estimate [13]) or as one hundred and fifty billion US dollars (the figure cited in the International Forum of Sovereign Wealth Funds membership profile, which appears to reflect the gross book value of the consolidated SOE portfolio rather than a market valuation [12]). The discrepancy is itself diagnostic: a holding whose stated AUM varies by a factor of three is a holding whose financial reporting has not yet been audited to international comparability standards.

Three governance facts about EIH must be held in view. First, the chair of its board is the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed himself. There is no constitutional separation of fiduciary and political

authority of the kind that the Singapore architecture provides through the President. Second, EIH publishes consolidated information but has not yet released subsidiary-level financial statements at the granularity that Temasek does, although it has formally adopted IFRS. Third, the holding's mandate is explicitly developmental rather than purely commercial; CEO Brook Taye has described the institution as an “entrepreneurial state” aiming to “achieve a huge amount of development growth through our state-owned enterprises” rather than through privatisation [9].

**The structural risk.** Each of these governance facts, taken individually, has plausible defences—the prime minister's chairmanship signals strategic seriousness; consolidated reporting is consistent with current African SOE practice; a developmental mandate is appropriate to a low-income economy. Taken together, however, they replicate the Khazanah architecture rather than the Temasek one. The risk is not that EIH will produce another 1MDB—it has nothing like the leverage 1MDB obtained, and Ethiopian Airlines is a genuinely well-run firm whose performance EIH did not create. The risk is that EIH consolidates the patronage architecture rather than disrupting it, and that the resulting holding will be vulnerable, when the prime minister is succeeded, to the politicisation that Khazanah suffered repeatedly across changes of government.

The corrective is institutional rather than rhetorical. A serious second-mandate reform of EIH would entail four elements: a constitutional or quasi-constitutional protection of fund assets requiring an independent fiduciary signature for any draw-down beyond commercial dividend distribution; the appointment of an independent board chair, with the prime minister stepping back to a presidential or honorary role; subsidiary-level financial reporting on Temasek standards, audited by international firms; and a published five-year performance benchmark for each subsidiary, against which support from the holding company is conditioned. None of these reforms requires the abandonment of the entrepreneurial-state doctrine. They require its institutionalisation.

### 5.3 The macroeconomic context

The institutional question intersects with a macroeconomic one. The World Bank's most recent country overview, published in March 2026, places Ethiopia's GDP growth in fiscal year 2024/25 at 9.2%, with per capita GDP at 979 US dollars, on a population of 135.9 million by World Bank reckoning—a figure roughly 20% higher than the Ethiopian Statistical Service's domestic estimate of 109 million for the same period [20, 26]. The IMF's 2024 Article IV projections, by contrast, placed 2024/25 growth at 6.5% and projected medium-term growth at 7.3%, against the 10% average of the two decades to 2019 [25]. The government's own 2025/26 projection is 10.2%; the United Nations puts the figure at 5.8% [8]. A spread of nearly 4.5 percentage points between official and external projections is itself a credibility cost: international counterparties pricing risk against the lower end of the range will demand higher returns to lend or invest, raising the cost of capital that the developmental state requires.

The poverty trajectory is unambiguous. The World Bank estimates the national poverty rate, measured at 3 US dollars per day in 2021 PPP terms, rose from 33% in 2016 to 39% in 2021, and is projected at 43% for 2025 [22, 23]. Rural poverty (45.2%) is approximately three times urban poverty (15.3%); child poverty for under-fourteens is 45.6%. Ethiopia entered debt distress in December 2023 when it missed a Eurobond interest payment, and defaulted on the principal of a 1.1B US dollar Eurobond on 11 December 2024 [21, 24]. The March 2025 Agreement in Principle with the Official Creditor Committee, covering approximately 8.4B US dollars, will provide an estimated 2.5B US dollars in debt-service relief through 2028; the IMF Extended Credit Facility of 3.4B US dollars supports the macroeconomic adjustment. The September 2025 Joint World Bank–IMF Debt Sustainability Analysis judged Ethiopia's external debt “unsustainable” and the country “in debt distress,” on the basis of protracted breaches of exports-related external debt indicators and a “weak Debt Carrying Capacity” rating that has held since October 2022 [21].

Yonas Biru, the former World Bank deputy global manager of the International Comparison Program and once interim chair of Abiy's own Independent Economic Advisory Council, has produced the most extensive recent diagnosis of the resulting macroeconomic pattern. His March 2026 paper *Ethiopia on the Brink: The Politics of Abundance in an Economy of Scarcity* [8] marshals the further evidence: that capital expenditure has fallen as a share of public spending while recurrent spending has expanded, in his

framing a shift from “developmental spending to survival spending”; that long-term capital investment, manufacturing output, and public expenditure on health and education have all declined in real terms since 2018; that 92% of high-school students fail the national university entrance examination, in a country whose digital-economy ambitions presuppose a literate technical workforce; and that regional governments, including the Oromia administration, have leased the same parcels of land to multiple parties and forced incumbent leaseholders to renegotiate at higher rates, in what he characterises as “predatory and extra-legal methods of revenue extraction.” The figures may be argued at the margin and the framing may be contested. The pattern is harder to dismiss. On substance and on many subjects, Dr Biru is a heavy weight thinker with eloquent delivery. His views are hard to ignore.

I will return to Dr Biru’s contribution in Section 7, because the way it has been delivered raises a separate question of intellectual responsibility that bears directly on the unity question. For now the substantive point stands: the macroeconomic and institutional architecture of the second-mandate economy resembles, on the available evidence, a Malaysian-Khazanah trajectory more than a Korean-chaebol one. This is not yet destiny. It is direction.

## 6 Three diagnostic questions

The reader who has followed the prior articles will recognise the standard against which I have argued such directions ought to be judged: not against an abstract model but against three concrete questions about whose interests are being served and whose are being deferred.

### 6.1 Are the poor being asked to subsidise an emerging industrialist class?

The honest answer is that the model under construction does not even produce an emerging private industrialist class on the Korean pattern; it produces, in the main, a politically connected contractor and importer class concentrated around state procurement, foreign exchange access, and the Addis Ababa corridor projects. The corridor itself is the most visible symbol. Defenders, the young including my son point to the genuine improvements in the urban fabric—paved arteries, expanded green space, civic pride, photogenic skylines that compare favourably to Nairobi or Kampala (and some even to Pennsylvania Avenue). Critics point to the displacement of urban poor without adequate compensation, the destruction of historical neighbourhoods including parts of Piazza, the contracting opacity, and the fiscal opportunity cost when rural and small-town Ethiopia is in distress.

Both observations are true. The synthesis is that the corridor is symbolically rich and distributively narrow. It is not Park’s Korea, where state subsidy was directed at firms that had to earn it through export performance; it is closer to the patronage-construction nexus that has been familiar in Marcos-era Manila or Najib-era Kuala Lumpur, where the visible artefacts of modernisation were paid for by populations whose median income did not rise commensurately. The macroeconomic reform of mid-2024, which floated the birr and ended the parallel exchange-rate distortion, was technically necessary and economically sound; its adjustment costs have however fallen disproportionately on the urban poor and the rural net-buyer, while the connected class with foreign-currency assets has been insulated. The 43% poverty rate cited above is the quantitative shadow of this distributional pattern. A serious second mandate would direct the next round of public investment toward the broad base—urbanisation and electrification through GERD powerlines, roads, health and education centres, agricultural extension,—and would prosecute corruption at levels that include figures close to the executive. The credibility of that direction will be measured by whether such prosecutions occur.

### 6.2 Is state monopoly stifling private competition?

The answer is largely yes, by design, and the design is now defended openly as “the entrepreneurial state.” Ethiopia maintains state monopoly or dominance in telecommunications (despite the partial entry of Safaricom Ethiopia from 2022), banking (despite the recent partial opening to foreign banks

from 2024), insurance, air transport, shipping, the railway, the industrial parks themselves, petroleum importation, and sugar. EIH consolidates these holdings under a single roof. The prime minister chairs that roof. The doctrine, in Brook Taye's phrasing, is that liberalising the market does not require selling state assets.

There is an argument for this. Singapore made it work, but the analysis in Section 4.1 has explained why—constitutional protection of fund assets, independent board, subsidiary-level transparency, pure commercial mandate. Ethiopia has not yet replicated those preconditions. Vietnam combines state ownership in strategic sectors with a vibrant private export manufacturing economy that operates within a competitive framework, but the Vietnamese discipline rests on a Party cadre system that polices SOE performance with a severity that is institutionally absent in Ethiopia. The argument fails when the state-owned firms are not externally disciplined—when their performance is assessed by political rather than commercial metrics, when their losses are absorbed by the budget, when their executives are appointed by patronage, and when their domestic competitors are denied the foreign exchange, credit, and licensing that the SOEs enjoy. The September 2025 Debt Sustainability Analysis identified domestic SOE debt as “highly concentrated,” with the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia holding virtually all SOE domestic debt by mid-2024, of which more than 90% was owed by three troubled SOEs “not regularly servicing their loans, which were publicly guaranteed” and were being “systematically renewed” with guarantees not made effective [21]. This is precisely the failure mode that the Korean export discipline was designed to prevent.

The corrective is not wholesale privatisation, which would simply transfer rents from state to oligarch in the manner that ruined the Russian transition of the 1990s. The corrective is the import of the Temasek discipline—transparent reporting, professional non-political management, hard performance benchmarks, willingness to close failing units—combined with deliberate space for private competition in sectors where SOEs have no comparative reason to dominate. Whether the second mandate will move in that direction is an open question. The signals so far are not encouraging.

### 6.3 Is political space closing toward dictatorship?

The honest answer is that political space has narrowed substantially over the second half of the first mandate and that the narrowing has continued. Opposition figures have been arrested, sometimes on credible charges and sometimes on charges whose only function was to remove a competitor; party-registration regulations have been deployed selectively; the press has been thinned by harassment, exile, and the chilling effect of selective prosecution; the federal coalition itself has been homogenised into the Prosperity Party in a manner that erased the EPRDF's prior internal competition; civil society organisations operating in the conflict regions have been constrained in ways that exceed any reasonable security necessity. The independence of the Election Board, professionally led by Melatwork Hailu, has been more credible than the broader political environment, but a credible board cannot administer a credible election in a country whose campaign environment is structurally narrowed.

The narrowing has not, however, taken the country to a Belarus-style or Eritrea-style closure, and it is important to keep the diagnosis calibrated. There are still independent voices publishing in Addis Ababa, including some that the government has tolerated with notable forbearance; there are still genuine multi-party contests in some regions; there is still a press, a judiciary that has on occasion ruled against the executive, and a parliament that occasionally discharges its function. The trajectory is concerning; the destination has not yet been reached. The window in which it can be reversed is, however, narrowing along with the space.

Whether the second mandate is used to widen the political space or to close it is the single most important diagnostic for the four singular interests with which this article began. Each of them depends on the existence of a credible domestic conversation about how to defend them. A country that cannot debate its Nile strategy, its Red Sea posture, its industrial policy, and its federation cannot mount the consensus that any of those defences requires. The narrowing of space is therefore not only a matter of liberal preference; it is a matter of the country's strategic capability.

## 7 The discipline of dissent

This brings us to the question of how dissent itself ought to be conducted, which is a question for citizens and intellectuals rather than for the prime minister. Yonas Biru's contribution to the contemporary Ethiopian debate is genuinely substantive. His diagnostic skill, deployed in his March 2026 paper and in years of prior commentary, has produced one of the most analytically serious bodies of critique of the current administration's economic policy. The figures he cites are largely correct or, where contested, are at least serious enough to warrant the government's response in kind; many of them have been confirmed by the World Bank and IMF documents discussed above, including the poverty trajectory, the debt distress, and the divergence between official and external growth projections. His insistence on disciplined sequencing as the missing ingredient is a contribution to a conversation that the government's own publications have not been willing to have.

The difficulty, which I raise here in the spirit of the elder's responsibility that Dr Biru himself has invoked in his own work, is that the rhetorical register in which his arguments have often been delivered tends to obscure their analytical content and to widen, rather than narrow, the gap between the contesting parties to the Ethiopian conversation. The use of mock prayers, the personalisation of attacks on the prime minister, the deployment of phrases like "Abiyonomics that thrives of lies and for lies," and the recurring deployment of ethnic adjectives in characterising the prime minister's circle—none of these strengthen the substantive case, and all of them harden the positions of those who might otherwise be persuaded by it. The critics of his earlier interventions, who include Amhara intellectuals who once were his allies, have made the point that a critique that conflates the legitimate failings of an administration with attacks on the ethnic identity of its officeholders ceases to be a critique and becomes a contribution to the very ethnic politics it claims to oppose. The point is not partisan; it is the elementary discipline of public reasoning.

The elder's responsibility, in any culture, is to reduce the temperature of the conversation he has been licensed by his standing to influence. In the Ethiopian tradition, the shimagilles are not partisans; they are the figures who restore the possibility of a settlement between disputants who have lost the ability to speak to each other. In the Oromo tradition, the gada elders are entrusted with the periodic renewal of authority precisely because they have aged out of the contest for it. An economist of Dr Biru's standing, who has held positions at the World Bank and at the prime minister's own advisory council, occupies a comparable space in the contemporary Ethiopian intellectual landscape. The use of that standing to deepen the rancour rather than to thread the needle of reconciliation is, I would argue with the courtesy his contributions deserve, a misuse of an asset that the country can ill afford to waste.

This is not an argument for silence or for muting criticism. It is an argument for the form of criticism. A diagnostic of the macroeconomic situation that is shorn of its mocking adornments would be more powerful, not less, because it could be heard by the constituencies that are presently inclined to dismiss it as factional. A direction that named the specific institutional reforms required—a Temasek-style charter for EIH; published performance benchmarks for the major SOEs; a debt-sustainability framework that distinguishes productive from rentier liabilities; a transparent budget for the corridor projects; a corruption-prosecution programme with quantitative annual targets—would be a contribution to the second-mandate conversation rather than an attack on its principal. The intellectual capital exists. The question is whether it will be deployed for reconciliation or for the satisfactions of polemic.

## 8 The Tigray question and the Amhara question, in real time

The reader who has followed the FCDO map this far will not need persuading that the two northern conflicts remain the principal threats to the stability of the second mandate. The current state of each requires sober description.

In Tigray, the federal government on 8 April 2026 extended by one year the mandate of the Tigray Interim Administration, headed by Tadesse Worede, whose original mandate would otherwise have expired the following day [3]. The extension averted, for the moment, an immediate flashpoint: in February the

Ethiopian National Defence Force had amassed forces, including heavy artillery and tanks, at multiple points along the Tigray border in response to Tigrayan operations into the disputed territories. The military build-up at the time signalled that an offensive to neutralise the TPLF was a serious possibility; the build-up was visible enough that it required the redeployment of forces from other theatres, including from Amhara, where the Fano insurgency was already escalating. The de facto coup within the Tigrayan leadership in March 2025—in which hardliners aligned with Debretsion Gebremichael deposed Getachew Reda from the TIA chairmanship—was followed in May 2025 by the federal government’s revocation of the TPLF’s legal standing as a party. This left Tigray effectively outside the constitutional channel through which it had been governed since 1991, and the TPLF’s reinstatement of military command over the Tigray Defence Forces in June 2025 acknowledged that fact. The current arrangement, in which an interim administration governs a region whose principal political party has been delegitimised and whose security forces are partially remilitarised, is not stable. The April 8 extension bought a year, not a settlement. The cumulative economic cost of the Tigray war alone has been estimated at approximately 80B US dollars [5]—roughly two-thirds of the country’s pre-war annual GDP.

In Amhara, the Fano insurgency has now passed its third anniversary. Through April 2026 the Amhara Association of America and other observers have recorded fighting in twenty-three woredas and city administrations across twelve zones in any given week, including North Wollo, South Wollo, North Shewa, East and West Gojjam, Awi, Bahir-Dar, North, Central, South, and West Gondar, and the contested Welkait–Tegele–Setit Humera area [4]. The ENDF’s redeployment from Amhara to the Tigray border earlier in the year created openings that the Amhara Fano National Movement has used to launch operations as far as South Gondar Zone. Human Rights Watch’s World Report 2026 documents abuses by all parties, including the targeted killing of teachers in Merawi by gunmen acting in the name of a Fano general strike, kidnappings of aid workers, and the continuing dispossession of Tigrayans from Western Tigray Zone [28].

The strategic complication, which has been described in The New Humanitarian’s recent analysis [29], is that the federal government now faces a possible three-way alignment of TPLF, Fano, and Eritrean military assets, joined operationally by the principle of “my enemy’s enemy.” Whether such an alignment is consummated or remains tactical, the federal capacity to manage two northern conflicts and a continuing southern insurgency simultaneously is severely strained. This is the security context in which the June 1 election will be held. It is also the context in which the four singular interests must be defended. In the absence of unity, there will be no Red Sea sovereignty—nor will there be economic development or GERD-driven urbanisation and industrialisation.

The Oromia question, which has been less central to the international press but is no less consequential domestically, requires its own paragraph. The Oromo Liberation Army insurgency will cross its eight-year mark in April 2026 with no political resolution. The conflict has been characterised by civilian killings and ransom kidnappings that have rendered East and West Wollega, Kelleme Wollega, and Horo Guduru Wollega effectively ungoverned, and by recurrent inter-communal violence between Oromo and Somali communities along border woredas. The federal government’s relationship with the Oromia regional administration, which is a Prosperity Party, has not produced the political resolution that the proximity ought to have made easier. The Wollega massacres of Amhara civilians, and the absence of credible federal protection or accountability, are among the most serious unaddressed wounds of the past five years.

In sum: the country that will hold an election in three weeks contains three active armed conflicts, one of which has been on the verge of resumed inter-state war as recently as eight weeks ago, and a security map in which a majority of the territory is judged unsafe for foreign visitors by an agency that has no political reason to overstate the risk. The election will be administered against this backdrop. The credibility of its outcome will depend on how that backdrop is acknowledged and what is done about it.

## 9 The cohesion mandate: a pledge that could still be made

The argument of the preceding section has documented the security context in which 1 June will be conducted. The natural inference, which much of the diaspora commentary has drawn, is that the country's prospects depend on insurgent restraint, on regional intermediation, or on some combination of pressures external to the federal executive. This is not the most useful inference. The cohesion of Ethiopia is, in the first instance, a question of choices available to the prime minister, and the second mandate offers him an opportunity that the first did not foreclose—if he chooses to use it for that purpose, and if he is willing to set aside the personal idiom and the ethnic-entrepreneurial habit that have shadowed an otherwise reformist record.

The pledge that could be made now, in the closing weeks of the campaign, is the one whose absence has been most conspicuous through the past five years: a pledge to govern from the position that produced the early reforms of 2018 and 2019—the position of an Ethiopian premier rather than the patron of a faction. The ethnic-entrepreneurial habit is corrosive in two registers, both of which the prime minister himself has cause to take seriously. In the long term it consumes the politician who indulges in it, because the constituency it cultivates is the constituency most willing to discard him when the next entrepreneur appears; the monkey-habit of fighting over crumbs is a habit that, once licensed in the political class, will eventually be turned against any leader who is no longer useful to it. In the short term it cedes to the armed movements the very ground on which they recruit: that the federal state is not impartial as between Ethiopia's communities, that the pieties of inclusive nationhood are rhetoric rather than practice, and that local self-protection is therefore a rational choice. A federal executive that resolved to govern as the executive of the whole nation rather than the patron of a part would, by that resolve alone, deprive the OLA and the Fano constellations of half their argument. I argue that the prime minister could generate the capacity to bring peace and democracy to the nation if he chose to govern a united Ethiopia that celebrates its diversity rather than its fault lines.

The other half of the argument is more concrete, and it can be dissolved by deliberate political work over months rather than years. The Fano insurgency has now passed three years, and across those years it has not produced—because it could not produce—a single unified political programme. Its constituent commands have failed to agree on leadership, on territorial demarcation, on a relationship to the constitutional question, on a posture toward neighbouring regions, even on the basic distinction between an insurgent army and a confederation of armed claimants to local rents [4]. The diagnostic is unkind but accurate: an insurgency that cannot unite on cause is an insurgency whose cause is not, in the first instance, the people in whose name it claims to fight. It is a coalition of rent-collectors, in which the men who hold the guns are also the men who decide what the road tolls, the harvests, the cattle, and the safety of the surrounding hamlets are worth. Every local bandit who carries a Kalashnikov in 2026 is a candidate for the warlordship of his sub-district unless the federal state offers a more credible promise of safety than he can. The same logic applies, with different vocabulary, to the OLA's persistence in the Wollegas and to the smaller predatory formations operating along the southern and western peripheries.

The pledge, properly made, therefore writes itself. It is the offer of the basic civic contract—personal safety, equality before the law, freedom of movement, freedom of association, freedom from arbitrary detention—to every Ethiopian, in every region, regardless of which armed formation has been claiming the right to extract from them. The federal state does not need to defeat the Fano militarily to make this offer; it needs to make the offer credibly enough that Fano's own foot-soldiers and the citizens around them begin to weigh whether the federal state can give them what their commanders cannot. The same calculus, made over months rather than weeks, has dissolved insurgencies elsewhere: in Colombia after the 2016 accord, in Aceh after the 2005 settlement, in Northern Ireland after the Good Friday discipline. None of these settlements required the prior defeat of the insurgent army. All of them required that the central state offer civilians a more attractive bargain than the insurgent quartermaster could.

## 9.1 The professional-army condition

This pledge has, however, an institutional precondition that the second mandate cannot evade. A federal state that offers safety to its citizens must be capable of producing safety, which is to say it must be served by armed forces whose composition, command, and conduct are professional in the technical sense of the term. The Ethiopian National Defence Force has, across the past decade, been asked to perform tasks for which no military in the world is suited and to absorb political incentives that no military in the world should be expected to absorb. The result is the recurring complaint, from across the political spectrum, that it has been deployed as the instrument of one faction or another rather than as the impartial force of the constitution.

The reform that the second mandate must commit to, if the cohesion pledge is to be more than rhetoric, is the reconstruction of the senior officer corps on the basis of professional competence rather than political proximity. A general staff selected for technical mastery, command experience, and demonstrated capacity for civil–military reasoning will know two things that a general staff selected for loyalty does not know. The first is how to serve an elected civilian executive without becoming its instrument: how to render obedience within the constitution and counsel within the cabinet, and how to refuse the unconstitutional order without staging a coup. The second, and more difficult, is how to advise an elected civilian executive against its own excesses—to tell the prime minister that a proposed campaign is not winnable on the timetable he has set, that the political risks of a particular escalation outweigh the military gains, that the cost in civilian life of a tactic under consideration would forfeit the moral standing on which the federal claim of legitimacy rests. This kind of advice is given only by officers whose careers do not depend on saying yes.

**Loyalty without integrity is a sword aimed directly at the neck.** The aphorism is the observation of any republic that has built and lost a republican army. An armed force loyal only to the person of the executive is, in every historical case, an instrument that eventually finds itself with the discretion to choose its loyalty—and the discretion to revoke it. An armed force loyal to the constitution, served by officers of personal integrity, is loyal to whichever executive the constitution has produced. The first is a sword the executive keeps at his own neck; the second is a shield. Ethiopia has, in living memory, had both kinds of armed force; the choice between them is, again, a choice the second mandate will make.

The reform menu in this register is short and known. It includes the depoliticisation of senior promotions; the rotation of regional commands on a published schedule; the establishment of a defence staff college whose curriculum admits the civil–military doctrine of accountable professional forces; the publication of a defence white paper that articulates the constitutional doctrine of military service; the parliamentary scrutiny of senior appointments; and the explicit prohibition of the use of military forces in domestic policing tasks except under conditions and timetables defined by statute. None of these is a foreign import alien to the Ethiopian tradition; the imperial Ethiopian army produced officers of independent professional standing, and the better units of the Derg-era forces did so within the constraints of a hostile political superstructure. The architecture of a professional national army is recoverable. Whether it will be recovered is, again, a choice.

## 9.2 What the pledge would foreclose

A cohesion pledge of this kind would foreclose certain temptations that have shadowed the first mandate and that, if not foreclosed, will harden into the operating logic of the second. It would foreclose the use of regional security forces as proxies in inter-regional disputes, because the federal armed forces would be the only legitimate armed actor at that scale. It would foreclose the cultivation of ethnic militias as informal extensions of the federal coalition, because the federal coalition would have committed to govern through constitutional rather than ethnic-cadre instruments. It would foreclose, perhaps most importantly, the most dangerous of the remaining temptations: the conversion of an internal political weakness into a foreign quarrel. A federal executive whose domestic legitimacy was secured by a credible cohesion pledge would have neither the need nor the option of escalating the Red Sea or Nile question for distractive purposes. [46].

The diaspora commentary often treats Abiy Ahmed as a figure already too far along the trajectory of personalisation to make this turn. The available evidence does not support that judgement. The reforms of 2018 and 2019, the macroeconomic correction of 2024, and the disciplined handling of the February 2026 Tigray border crisis [3] all suggest a politician capable of strategic adjustment when the analytic case is clear and the political cost is bounded. The political cost of the cohesion pledge described here would be paid, in the first instance, by the patronage networks that benefit from the present architecture; the political dividend, also in the first instance, would be the dissipation of the recruiting environment in which the Fano and OLA insurgencies have flourished. The accounting is favourable to the prime minister himself, on a horizon longer than the next news cycle. Whether he chooses to read the accounting that way is a judgement only he can render—and a judgement that the second mandate, by its choices in its early months, will reveal.

## 10 The Red Sea claim, and the voices history silenced

The argument of the preceding sections has been institutional and forward-looking. This section provides the historical backbone on which two of the four singular interests rest: Red Sea sovereignty understood as a self-defence imperative rather than principally an economic one, and the question of how Ethiopia ought, today, to relate to a country whose voluntary federation in 1952 was the first and only act of self-determination its people were ever permitted to make. The argument is that history is being weaponised in the present moment by adversaries who would prefer a particular reading of it; that an honest reckoning with the historical record favours, rather than complicates, the four singular interests of this article; and that the path of advocacy and good-neighbourliness, with the door to voluntary union left open but never made the priority of Ethiopian policy, is the path that the historical record actually licenses.

### 10.1 Self-defence as the primary register of the Red Sea claim

Ethiopia's claim to a sovereign outlet on the Red Sea is conventionally framed as an economic question, and on those grounds alone it is overwhelming: a country of one hundred and thirty million people, whose dam now generates 6,000 megawatts of power and whose industrial corridor projects depend on container access to global markets, cannot rationally accept indefinite dependence on a single transit corridor through Djibouti for ninety-five per cent of its foreign trade. The economic case is well rehearsed in the Abraham Accords sequels with more emphasis on the primacy of self-defence [46, 47, 48, 49]. Self-defence is the principal argument I want to further advance here.

In the more fundamental register of self-defence, three observations make this register primary, not secondary. First, the entire framework of international law that licences Ethiopia's economic interest in transit access—the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) Part X provisions on the rights of land-locked states, the African Union's territorial-integrity principle—provides no remedy when an adversary chooses to weaponise access. The Houthi closure of the Bab el-Mandeb in 2024, the intermittent disruption of fuel deliveries through Djibouti during the 2020–22 Tigray war, and the May 2026 Sudanese threat to “enter into open confrontation” with Addis Ababa over the alleged Bahir Dar drone strikes all demonstrate that the legal regime under which a land-locked state nominally has access is thinner than the strategic environment in which that access is exercised. Second, the cost of being land-locked is paid first not in trade margins but in deterrent capability. A state whose sole port of entry can be closed by a single neighbour has, in the strict military sense, no autonomous defence posture; its negotiating position with that neighbour, with that neighbour's allies, and with any larger adversary that seeks leverage over it, is foreclosed in advance. Third, the historical record of the 1962–91 federation period, the 1998–2000 border war, and the 2018–20 thaw and 2020–26 re-rupture all teach the same lesson: that Eritrean–Ethiopian relations have been, since 1962, a function of who held what coastline at what moment.

This is why no international body, no neighbouring state, and no foreign envoy can legitimately tell Ethiopia that its Red Sea claim must be settled in any particular way, on any particular timetable, or against any particular consideration. Self-defence is not a privilege extended by external benefactors; it is, as Article 51 of the United Nations Charter affirms, an inherent right of states. The recent reporting that the Trump administration is preparing to lift sanctions on Eritrea, brokered by Egypt and pursued by senior Africa envoy Massad Boulos, does not alter this proposition; if anything, it makes the proposition more urgent. American or European discomfort with how Ethiopia chooses to defend itself against the loss of strategic depth is a diplomatic problem to be managed; it is not a legal or moral instrument by which Ethiopia's defence calculus can be vetoed.

## 10.2 Democratic Spring: Eritrea under British administration, 1941–1952

The conventional narrative of Eritrean history begins with sixty years of Italian colonisation, ends with thirty years of Ethiopian rule, and treats the eleven years between as a transitional intermission. This narrative serves the political interests of both the Eritrean independence movements that emerged after 1962 and the international diplomatic framework that ratified those movements' victory in 1991. It does not, however, fit the historical record well. The eleven years from the British defeat of the Italians in April 1941 to the federation with Ethiopia in September 1952 were the only period in modern Eritrean history during which competitive multi-party politics flourished, in which a free press operated, and in which the Eritrean population was permitted to deliberate publicly on its own political future [36, 37].

Three principal political currents emerged during these years. The Unionist Party (*Mahbar Fegri Hagar Eretra*, "Society for the Love of the Land of Eritrea"), founded in May 1941 and formalised in 1944 under the leadership of Tedla Bairu, advocated immediate and unconditional union with Ethiopia. The Muslim League, founded in 1947 under Ibrahim Sultan, advocated independence with particular concern for the protection of the Muslim lowland population. A third current, advocating sovereign Eritrean independence ("Eritrea for Eritreans"), was led by Wolde-Mariam. To these were added smaller formations advocating partition along religious lines between Ethiopia and Sudan, continued Italian trusteeship, and various federal compromises [36]. The British Military Administration, on the documented analysis of the historian Tekeste Negash and the Horn Review's recent reconstruction [38], actively engineered partition propaganda through its own publications and through the BMA's chief administrator Stephen Longrigg, in pursuit of British strategic interests in Red Sea shipping lanes and Nile hydrology rather than in service of Eritrean self-determination.

The 1952 elections to the Eritrean Assembly produced a Unionist plurality but not a majority; the federation was constituted by coalition between the Unionists and a Muslim faction, and the Eritrean constitution prepared by the United Nations was adopted by the Assembly on 10 July 1952 and ratified by Emperor Haile Selassie on 11 September 1952. The British departed on 15 September 1952. The federation was, in this strictly legal-historical sense, an act of incorporation through a freely deliberated constitutional process in which the largest Eritrean political force advocated for it—and not, as later mythology would have it, an annexation. The annexation happened ten years later: on 14 November 1962, Emperor Haile Selassie abrogated the federal autonomy, dissolved the Eritrean Assembly, and made Eritrea the fourteenth province of an imperial Ethiopia. Before 1962, the relationship had a constitutional basis, contested but legitimate; after 1962, it had only the legitimacy of force. The thirty years of armed struggle that followed, and the 1991 referendum conducted under conditions controlled by the EPLF, were the consequences of that 1962 abrogation rather than of the 1952 federation it dismantled.

**The voices that history silenced.** The narrative that "all Eritreans wanted independence" reflects the political conditions of 1991 and after, not the political conditions under which Eritreans actually deliberated when they were free to do so. The Unionist current was the largest single political force in Eritrea between 1944 and the 1962 abrogation; advocacy of union became prosecutable as treason in liberation-front-controlled territory after 1961, and the EPLF's eventual hegemony foreclosed competing political programmes. Those silenced voices have intellectual heirs in the contemporary Eritrean diaspora—some of whom have begun to articulate, around the symbolism of the federation-era flag of 1952–62, a democratic alternative to the present authoritarianism in

Asmara. The recovery of that voice through scholarly work and through political advocacy, on either side of the border, is a legitimate exercise that no party should foreclose.

### 10.3 The position: good-neighbourliness primary, voluntary union open

The argument I want to draw from this record is not that the 1952 federation should be reinstated, nor that the 1991 referendum should be re-litigated. Those are matters for Eritreans to determine, by means and on a timetable they choose. The argument is the narrower one. Three propositions follow from the record and should be held separately.

First, the right of Ethiopia to a sovereign Red Sea outlet is a self-defence question, prior to and independent of the question of Eritrea's political future, and not subject to external veto. Second, Ethiopia's posture toward Eritrea should be one of good-neighbourliness, with the four singular interests of this article as the priority of Ethiopian policy and Eritrean unification as no part of the active programme; the priority of Ethiopians today is the perfecting of their own federation, not the absorption of another country whose people have not asked for it. Third, the voluntary union of an Eritrean state, freely deliberated under democratic conditions Eritreans themselves construct, is a future possibility that no Ethiopian policy should foreclose, and the Eritrean intellectual current that has historically advocated such union deserves the protection of free advocacy on both sides of the border. These three propositions are mutually reinforcing only if they are held separately. They become mutually destructive when they are conflated—when, for example, the self-defence claim is made conditional on a unification programme, or when the unification possibility is denied to Eritreans by Ethiopian policy that pretends it is none of their concern.

### 10.4 The medieval Ethiopian state and the question of who is indigenous

The deeper history that adversaries of the Ethiopian state have begun to weaponise concerns the territorial extent of the medieval polity and the question of which contemporary national communities are “original” to it. This exhibit is necessary because the question is being asked in earnest by serious intellectual currents, both within Ethiopia and in the diaspora; it is not necessary because the answer should determine present-day citizenship in the federation. The article's civic-Ethiopian commitment is, as the cohesion section has insisted, prior to any historiographical adjudication.

The reign of Amda Seyon I (1314–1344), known in the Ge'ez chronicles as “Pillar of Zion” and bearing the throne name Gebre Mesqel (“Servant of the Cross”), is the earliest period for which a substantial royal chronicle survives [39]. That chronicle, which scholars conventionally title the *Glorious Victories of Amda Seyon*, documents a Christian polity whose effective authority extended approximately from Chew Bahir in the southern lakes region to the Red Sea coast at Massawa, and from the Gulf of Aden port of Zeila in the east to the western lowlands toward Akobo and the upper Nile. Amda Seyon's campaigns against the Sultanate of Ifat (1332) and against the early Adal Sultanate near Zeila, his confiscation by Sabr ad-Din I that triggered the war, and the chronicle's enumeration of the provinces of his realm together establish a polity reaching the sea on its own authority, within recognisable continuity with the Aksumite kingdom that preceded it by a millennium and the imperial Ethiopia that followed.

A note on naming. The chronicle, the contemporary Arab geographer al-Umari, and the older *Kebra Nagast* use the indigenous self-designation *Ityopya*—“Ethiopia.” The European exonym “Abyssinia,” derived from Arabic *al-Habasha*, entered European usage through Portuguese and Italian missionary records of the 16th century onward and was, throughout the modern colonial period, frequently deployed to denote a smaller and more fragile polity than the indigenous record attests. “Ethiopia,” not “Abyssinia,” is the historically and indigenously correct name of the polity. The point matters because adversaries of the federation in 2026 occasionally retrieve the exonym precisely to suggest a smaller and more reducible Ethiopia than the one Amda Seyon's chronicle, the Aksumite inscriptions, and seventeen centuries of Ge'ez liturgical literature unambiguously document.

**The Oromo question, treated honestly.** The chronicle does not mention the Oromo. This is a fact, and it is one of the facts to which contemporary Geez-civilisational currents appeal in support of arguments I have rejected elsewhere in this article. The standard historiographical reading of this fact is that the Oromo population movements (the “Great Oromo Migrations” or, in older terminology, the Galla expansions) into the central and northern Ethiopian highlands occurred principally between 1530 and the early 17th century, from a cradle area in the southern lakes region near Lake Turkana and modern Bale, in the wake of the Adal–Christian wars led by Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (Imam Ahmad, known to the chronicles as Gragn) [40, 41]. The standard reading is documented by the 1593 chronicle of the Gamo monk Aba-Bahrey, by the European Jesuit observers of the period (Manuel de Almeida, Jerónimo Lobo), and by the internal records of the Oromo *gada* generation cycle which Aba-Bahrey reproduces. A competing scholarly view, articulated notably by Ayele Bekerie (2004) and developed by Mohammed Hassen and others, argues that the Oromo presence in the broader Horn predates the 16th century by some considerable interval and that the “migration” was a confederation movement and territorial reorganisation within an existing presence rather than a wholly new arrival [42]. The two views are not as far apart as their political deployment suggests; both accept that the 16th-century *gada* movements transformed the demographic geography of the Ethiopian highlands.

The exhibit’s purpose is not to adjudicate this historiographical dispute. The exhibit’s purpose is to insist on the distinction between two questions that adversaries of civic-Ethiopian unity routinely conflate. The first question is whether the Oromo, or any other community, was a major demographic presence in the territory of medieval Ethiopia under Amda Seyon in 1340. The chronicle says it was not, and the standard historiography concurs. The second question is whether the Oromo, or any other community, is today an Ethiopian people whose political and constitutional standing is equal to any other’s. The answer to the second question is determined not by the first but by nearly five centuries of co-residence, intermarriage, joint state-building, the emergence of an Oromo administrative and intellectual class within every major Ethiopian regime since the late 18th century, and the constitutional order that has been in force since 1995. To answer the second question by reference to the first—to claim that the Oromo, the Sidama, the Wolayta, the Gurage, the Hadiya, the Kambata, or any other community is “not Ethiopian” because the medieval chronicle did not name them—is a category error and a political programme this article rejects. By the same logic, no demographic group whose ancestors arrived or consolidated in the territory after the 14th century could be called Ethiopian, which would exclude (among many others) the Argobba, the Beni-Amer, the Gumuz of Benishangul, and the post-1888 settler populations of Addis Ababa itself. Civic membership in a federation is settled by the federation’s constitution, not by its founding chronicle.

There is a separate observation to record, which this article attaches no policy weight to but which can be honestly stated: there is, in the contemporary Ethiopian intellectual landscape, a tendency among some currents that identify with the Semitic-Ge’ez tradition (Tigrayan, Amhara, and certain diaspora communities) to read the Oromo as “newcomers” to the Ethiopian state, and a corresponding tendency among some Cushitic-identified currents (most articulately the Oromo nationalist tradition) to read the Christian-highland Semitic tradition as a recent and conquering elite. Both readings are partial; both have political constituencies; and both are poor guides to the federation’s actual demographic and historical composition. The article’s position is that neither reading should be permitted to set the terms of contemporary Ethiopian citizenship.

## 10.5 The proposition, restated

The argument of this section can be restated in a single proposition. Ethiopia’s right to a sovereign Red Sea outlet is a self-defence imperative, prior to its economic dimension, grounded in the inherent right of states to defend their strategic depth, and not subject to foreign veto. The question of Eritrea’s political future is for Eritreans, conducted under democratic conditions Eritreans themselves construct, with the historic unionist current entitled to the same advocacy rights as any other; Ethiopian policy should rest on good-neighbourliness, with voluntary union neither pursued as a programme nor foreclosed

as a possibility. The medieval Ethiopian state was real, named itself Ethiopia, reached the sea, and contained the demographic ancestors of many but not all of the contemporary national communities of the federation; the federation's contemporary composition is settled by the constitution, not by the chronicle. Each of these propositions is consistent with the four singular interests with which this article began. None of them, taken honestly, supplies a justification for war.

## 11 What citizens owe and what is owed to them

The standard observation that elections in such conditions are problematic is correct and incomplete. The more useful observation is that citizens in such conditions face an obligation that is not extinguished by the conditions; it is intensified by them. The argument I want to make here is one I have made in earlier articles in this sequence and which deserves to be made again at this moment.

The first obligation is to refuse the consolation of withdrawal. A voter who decides, on the morning of 1 June, that the result is preordained and therefore that participation is futile is making a choice whose effect is to cede the field. A higher participation rate constrains an incumbent who must then deliver on the mandate. A lower rate licenses neglect. A spoiled or blank ballot is recorded; it communicates exhaustion without acquiescence. The participation question is therefore not a question of whether one's vote will change the result; it is a question of whether one's absence will license the next five years.

The second obligation is to campaign where campaigning is possible, and to support those who do. The fragmentation of the opposition is real, and it is partly the product of design and partly the product of the structural difficulty of building cross-cutting parties in an ethnic-federal architecture. It is not, however, absolute. Forty-seven parties have registered candidates. Some of them are credible. Some of them, including the Sidama Unity Party, several Amhara groupings, and a handful of cross-cutting civic formations, have the potential to win local seats whose aggregation matters. Citizens who care about the direction of the country can support these efforts with money, time, and the simple act of public association. Some campaigners and candidates have been imprisoned; some have been harassed; some have been driven into exile. The honest acknowledgement is that the personal cost of opposition activity in present-day Ethiopia is real and that it will not be borne by everyone. Those who are willing to bear it should be supported by those of us who are not.

The third obligation is the discipline of the public conversation, which I have already raised in connection with Dr Biru's contributions and which applies equally to all of us. The Ethiopian conversation has been, for at least a generation, structurally inflamed by ethnic frame and rhetorical extremity. The discipline required is mundane: refusing to amplify rumour, declining to attribute motive on the basis of ethnicity, supporting the press where it is independent, contributing to its work where it is funded by readers, holding our own intellectual heroes to the same standards we apply to those we oppose. None of this is glamorous. All of it is necessary. The four singular interests cannot be defended by a country whose conversation is conducted in the register of accusation rather than in the register of reasoning.

The fourth obligation, owed by intellectuals, elders, and diaspora figures with platforms, is to use those platforms to narrow rather than to widen the gap. This is the obligation I have asked Dr Biru to consider. I extend it to myself and to my colleagues. There is no honour in being correct about Ethiopia's failings if one's correctness contributes to their continuation. The country needs more shimagilles and fewer prosecutors of factional grievance. It needs more elders willing to settle and fewer willing to score. The Ethiopian repertoire contains both kinds of figure; the choice between them is, as always, available.

What is owed to citizens by the state is the corollary. A voter who shows up is owed an electoral environment in which her vote can be cast and counted; a candidate who registers is owed an environment in which she can campaign without being arrested; a region whose citizens cannot vote because of war is owed an explanation and a programme; a press that reports unfavourably is owed legal protection and not selective prosecution. The credibility of the second mandate rests on the discharge of these reciprocal obligations as well as on the more visible questions of policy direction.

## 12 The four interests, defended or deferred

Let me return to the four interests with which this article began and read each through the diagnostic that has now been laid out.

**GERD.** The dam is built and operating. Its strategic value to the country depends on the conversion of installed capacity into industrial competitiveness and household electrification. That conversion requires functioning industrial parks, transmission and distribution upgrades, and a regulatory environment in which manufacturing firms can earn world-market returns. The current model, with state-owned development through EIH and the absence of disciplined export benchmarks, does not produce that conversion at the rate the country requires. The defence of GERD as an asset therefore requires the import of the Korean disciplinary content, even if not the Korean political wrapping. GERD must have a performance benchmark - urbanisation, industrialisation, export, economic development and buy-in of ownership by all.

**Red Sea sovereignty.** This is the interest that the second mandate must handle with the greatest care, because the temptation to convert internal weakness into a foreign quarrel is one of the oldest temptations in regional statecraft. The right approach—argued at greater length in the Abraham Accords sequels [46, 47, 48, 49] and on its self-defence foundations in Section 10—is principled non-isolation: the cultivation of African and continental coalitions that make Ethiopia harder to coerce, the maintenance of working relations with Djibouti, the avoidance of military adventures whose probability of success is low and whose probability of catastrophe is non-trivial, and the patient construction of legal and commercial mechanisms that secure access without requiring confrontation. The defence of Red Sea sovereignty is, in this register, also a defence of internal unity, because a war for sea access undertaken from a fractured domestic base would be lost twice. The self-defence imperative, however, is not negotiable; the historical foundations of the claim, set out in Section 10, do not depend on either the Eritrean question or the unification question, and no foreign veto is admissible against it.

**Economic development.** The diagnostic above produces a clear directional recommendation. The prime minister demonstrated his leadership and vision on what is possible in Ethiopia. However, macroeconomic figures are unmistakable that resource allocation requires a revisit: redirect investment from the corridor to the broad base; impose Temasek-style discipline on EIH and its subsidiaries; protect smallholder tenure and rural credit as productivity instruments rather than political ones; preserve the macroeconomic reform of 2024 while sequencing financial liberalisation carefully; prosecute corruption credibly, including at levels close to the executive. None of these moves requires Park's authoritarianism. All of them require a level of executive discipline that the second mandate would have to supply.

**Internal unity.** This is the existential one. It cannot be produced by exhortation, by election, or by external mediation. It can only be produced by bargains kept and dignities respected—in the accumulated work of the federation—and, as set out at length in Section 9, by deliberate choices the prime minister himself can still make. The Amhara and Tigrayan administrative leaders must open a level of dialogue that avoids unnecessary bloodshed and addresses the question of the contested lands. They should convene a cross-border forum for peace and reconciliation: no matter how high the accumulated hate and pain, the humanity of those who live on either side of the line must come first. The harder truth lies behind the diplomatic surface. One reading is that the prime minister has out-manoeuvred the TPLF over the Pretoria Agreement and that its principal signatories—Getachew, Tsadkan, and Tadesse—are now de facto on the federal payroll. The other reading is that the TPLF used Pretoria to buy time and has since consolidated its agency in concert with Isaias Afwerki and Egyptian interlocutors. Either reading is incompatible with treating the 2022 settlement as a self-executing template. The political reality of 2026 is that the Pretoria text has been overtaken by events, by the de-legalisation of the TPLF, and by the unresolved question of how an Ethiopian constitutional order should adjudicate territorial claims

that long pre-date and now outlive that text. The contested lands of Welkait, Tegede, Setit-Humera, and Raya are a legal and historical question, not an ethnic one. They were taken by force of arms in 1991 and re-taken by force of arms in 2020–21; the only path that does not perpetuate that cycle is adjudication through the Ethiopian federal constitutional process, with reference to historical-administrative records, conducted as a matter of national law rather than as a contest between ethnic blocs. This essay declines to argue the question on ethnic-political lines and argues instead from the standpoint of a united, civic Ethiopia in which all citizens—Amhara, Tigrayan, Oromo, and others—are equal before that law. The opening of credible political dialogue with the Fano constellation; the engagement of the OLA on terms that can produce a genuine cessation; the reform of the security apparatus toward lawful and accountable conduct, including the reconstruction of the senior officer corps on professional rather than political foundations; the publication of federal transfers and procurement at sufficient granularity to permit citizen scrutiny: these are the works of internal unity. They are not the only works, but they are the ones whose absence makes everything else more difficult.

### 13 Conclusion: Credibility that must be Earned

The June 2026 election is the moment at which Ethiopia’s institutional credibility will be tested. The test is not principally whether the result will be free and fair in the sense in which a contested democracy uses that phrase; the test is whether the second mandate will be used to produce, in the years following the ballot, the credibility that the ballot itself cannot supply.

The four singular interests can only be defended by a state that is institutionally credible at the bargaining table. Credibility is built by the discharge of difficult choices under conditions in which easier choices were available. The choices before the second mandate are the ones identified in this article: between Korean discipline and Malaysian rentierism; between corridor symbolism and broad-based development; between state monopoly defended as “entrepreneurial” and the Temasek discipline that alone makes such monopoly developmental rather than predatory; between the closing of political space and the widening of it; between the deferral of the federation’s hardest bargains and their patient reconstruction; between the easy gratification of foreign quarrel and the difficult discipline of principled non-isolation. None of these choices is between purity and corruption. All of them are between directions.

The choices available to citizens are smaller in scale and not smaller in importance. A vote cast under conditions of foreknown outcome is a different act from a vote refused; a campaign supported under harassment is a different act from a withdrawal; a public conversation conducted in the register of reasoning is a different country from one conducted in the register of accusation. The intellectual elders of the Ethiopian conversation, in the diaspora and at home, have a discipline of their own to observe.

The prime minister will return on the evening of 1 June with power. Whether he returns with authority will be answered not on that evening but in the years that follow it. The Ethiopian historical record contains both kinds of return. The country has been built and rebuilt many times. The question is not whether it can be built again. It is whether what is built this time, in the conditions catalogued by a foreign cartographer with no axe to grind, will be worth inheriting.

## A FCDO travel advisory: population/constituency coverage

This annex translates the qualitative description of FCDO Edition 42 into a quantitative population and constituency analysis. Regional populations are taken from the Ethiopian Statistical Service (ESS) 2024 mid-year projection [26, 27], which is approximately 20% below the World Bank and UN figures of 130–136 million for the same period; the World Bank-aligned figures would scale all categories proportionately and would not change the percentage shares materially. The within-region splits between FCDO categories are estimated from the Edition 42 map by visual inspection, cross-checked against ACLED and ICG conflict-zone reporting [4, 7, 5]. The estimates are conservative; revised data would not be expected to alter the headline finding that the combined red-and-orange zone exceeds 40% of the population.

Table 1: Ethiopian regional population by FCDO Edition 42 advisory category. Population in millions (ESS 2024 projection). Within-region splits estimated from visual inspection of the FCDO map [1], cross-checked against ACLED, Crisis Group, and Africa Practice conflict reporting.

Region	Total (M)	Red (M)	Orange (M)	Green (M)	Dominant FCDO status
Oromia	42.0	6.0	3.0	33.0	Mixed; west red, south orange, centre green
Amhara	23.5	23.0	0.5	0.0	Almost entirely red
Somali	6.8	0.3	6.5	0.0	Almost entirely orange
South Region	7.7	0.0	0.0	7.7	Green
Tigray	5.9	5.9	0.0	0.0	Entirely red
Sidama	4.7	0.0	0.0	4.7	Green
Addis Ababa	5.0	0.0	0.0	5.0	Green
Southwest Region	4.2	0.0	0.0	4.2	Green
Afar	2.0	0.2	1.5	0.3	Mostly orange
Benishangul-Gumuz	1.2	1.2	0.0	0.0	Entirely red
Dire Dawa	0.6	0.0	0.6	0.0	Orange
Gambella	0.5	0.5	0.0	0.0	Entirely red
Harari	0.25	0.0	0.25	0.0	Orange
<b>Total</b>	<b>104.4</b>	<b>37.1</b>	<b>12.4</b>	<b>54.9</b>	
<b>Share</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>35.5%</b>	<b>11.9%</b>	<b>52.6%</b>	

The 4.6 million residual difference between the regional total (104.4M) and the ESS national figure (109M) reflects rounding and the unallocated population at zone or woreda boundaries between FCDO colour bands. Assigning that residual proportionately would yield approximately 38.7M (35.5%) red, 13.0M (11.9%) orange, and 57.3M (52.6%) green, with effectively no change in shares.

### Headline numbers.

- **35.5%** of the population lives under FCDO “advise against all travel” (red).
- **11.9%** lives under FCDO “advise against all but essential travel” (orange).
- Combined: **47.4%** of the population lives under FCDO security restriction more demanding than “standard caution.”
- Translated to the federal House of People’s Representatives at 547 single-member constituencies, this is approximately **194 red constituencies**, **65 orange constituencies**, and **259 combined red+orange constituencies**—about 47% of the federal lower house.

The constituency translation assumes a uniform population-to-constituency ratio of approximately 199,000 per federal constituency (109M / 547). The actual distribution is somewhat more even than population shares suggest, because constituencies are demographically apportioned, but the order of magnitude is robust: between two-fifths and one-half of federal constituencies sit in territory where the FCDO judges normal civilian activity unsafe. By area rather than by population, the red zone is significantly larger—in the order of 55–60% of Ethiopia’s land mass—because the red zone includes the

relatively sparsely populated Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, and the Tigray and Amhara highlands as well as the dense Amhara population centres.

The implication for the credibility of 1 June is that, even in the unlikely event of a flawless administration of the ballot itself, the political space within which forty-seven parties are notionally competing has been geographically constrained by an external assessment that no domestic actor controls. The remedy is not to argue with the FCDO; the remedy is to remove the conditions that produced the assessment.

### A.1 Exhibit A.1: the demographic dimension— a count contested

Geographic exclusion is one face of the credibility problem on 1 June. A second face, which compounds rather than substitutes for the first, is demographic. The FCDO map shows where citizens live; it does not by itself tell us how the people who live in those places are counted. Once the count is contested, the political weight assigned to a region or to a community is contested, and the formula by which votes become parliamentary seats inherits the contestation. This exhibit sets out the demographic dimension as a structural matter, not as ethnic advocacy. The argument is that several of Ethiopia's communities have credible reasons to believe they are imperfectly counted and represented under the present federal architecture, that this is an architectural problem rather than a problem of any one community, and that it intersects with the security map to produce a compounded democratic deficit that the June 2026 election cannot, on its own, cure.

**The data we have, and do not have.** Ethiopia has conducted three full national censuses in its history: 1984 (under the Derg), 1994 (under the transitional government), and 2007 (under the consolidated EPRDF state). The 2017 census was scheduled but indefinitely postponed; the country has now gone nineteen years without a count. The longer the absence of a credible enumeration, the more the political weight of every community is governed by figures whose underlying methodology is ageing, contested, or both. The first injustice in the present architecture is therefore temporal: the federation continues to apportion seats, transfers, and recognition on the basis of a count that predates more than half of the federation's current voters.

**The Abegaz finding.** The most rigorous engagement with the 2007 returns is Berhanu Abegaz's 2015 analysis [50], which demonstrated that the implied annual growth rate for the Amhara population between 1994 and 2007—2%—is substantially below the national rate of 2.6%, below the Tigrayan rate of 2.9%, and dramatically below the implied Oromo rate of 3.8%. The Demographic and Health Survey data over the same period show Amhara fertility at or marginally above the national mean and mortality comparable to other highland communities; there is no biological mechanism that produces this growth-rate divergence. Abegaz canvasses four alternative explanations—differential fertility and mortality, identity shifting, selective emigration, and discriminatory population control—and finds each insufficient by an order of magnitude. By elimination and by reasoning from the political-economy incentives of the period, he concludes that approximately three million Amhara were missing from the 2007 enumeration. The estimate is robust to alternative growth-rate assumptions, with an upper bound of approximately six million. This is not a marginal statistical anomaly. Three million people is roughly the population of Tigray, or the entire ethnic Affar community combined with the entire ethnic Wolayta, declared not to exist.

The CSA itself implicitly conceded the point. Five years after the 2007 census it raised the Amhara region's annual growth rate from 1.7% to 2.3% in its mid-census projections, without published methodological justification [50].

**Projection to 2026.** Carrying Abegaz's robust central estimate forward at the demographically defensible Tigrayan growth rate of 2.9% per annum, the gap between official and corrected figures has widened, not narrowed, since 2007. Table 2 sets out three scenarios, all on a national total of 132 million for 2026 (the UN/World Bank figure):

Table 2: Projected major-community shares for 2026 under three scenarios, on a national total of 132 million. Scenario A extrapolates the 2007 census shares forward; Scenario B applies Abegaz’s correction (1994 baseline carried forward at the Tigrayan growth rate); Scenario C illustrates what would have to be true for the figure of approximately 50 million Amhara cited in some Amhara political discourse to be accurate. The exhibit takes no position on Scenario C beyond noting that it exceeds defensible methodology by approximately ten million people.

Community	A: Official		B: Abegaz		C: Claimed	
	(M)	%	(M)	%	(M)	%
Oromo	47.0	35.6%	41.5	31.4%	41.5	31.4%
Amhara	33.0	25.0%	40.5	30.7%	50.0	37.9%
Tigrayan	7.5	5.7%	7.9	6.0%	7.9	6.0%
Somali	8.5	6.4%	8.4	6.4%	6.4	4.8%
Sidama	5.5	4.2%	4.7	3.6%	3.7	2.8%
Other (~75 groups)	30.5	23.1%	29.0	22.0%	22.5	17.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>132.0</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>132.0</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>132.0</b>	<b>100%</b>

The defensible analytical assessment is that Scenario B is closer to reality than Scenario A and that Scenario C—which has gained currency in some quarters of Amhara political discourse—exceeds the analytically defensible upper bound by approximately 20%. The legitimate response to a credible grievance does not require accepting an inflated figure; the structural argument stands at the order of magnitude that Abegaz’s methodology supports. A community of approximately forty million people that the federation continues to record as thirty-three million is owed a correction. The figures matter because the people they represent matter; the figures do not need to be exaggerated to deserve correction.

**The architectural problem is not Amhara-specific.** This exhibit takes no partisan position on ethnic politics. The point of dwelling on the Amhara case at length is that, as the largest-magnitude instance, it makes the structural problem visible. The same logic of dispersion-without-representation applies to every Ethiopian community whose members live, in significant numbers, outside their statutorily designated home region:

- **The Gurage–Silte** are commercially active and territorially dispersed, with a substantial presence in Addis Ababa and the southern trading towns; their home zone was administratively fragmented in 2002.
- **Tigrayans outside Tigray**, in Addis Ababa, the trading cities, and abroad, are channelled into representation through Tigray region but are themselves a non-trivial share of the community.
- **The Wolayta, Hadiya, Kafa, and Gurage** have launched movements for their own regional state status comparable to the Sidama referendum that succeeded in 2019.
- **Afar and Somali pastoralists** are likely operationally undercounted by twenty to 30% because semi-nomadic populations are genuinely difficult to enumerate; this is not political design but operational deficit, and the consequence is no less unjust.
- **Urban populations** of every ethnicity, in Addis Ababa, Hawassa, Dire Dawa, Jimma, Adama, Mekelle, Bahir Dar, and Gondar, are by their nature mixed and are channelled into a constitutional architecture that treats mixedness as an anomaly.

The 2007 returns recorded the Amhara as the plurality community in Addis Ababa at 47%, the Oromo at 19.5%, the Gurage at 16.3%, and the Tigrayans at 6.2% [51]. The constitutional architecture nonetheless treats the city as a chartered federal territory rather than as the demographic mosaic it actually is, and the recurring tensions over the Master Plan, Sheger City, and the federal–Oromia boundary are downstream consequences of that mismatch. The same logic applies, with different ethnic content but the same structural form, in Hawassa, Dire Dawa, and several other cities.

**Where the demographic and the security exclusions converge.** The two exclusions catalogued in this annex are not independent. Approximately twenty-three million Amhara live in Amhara region; the FCDO classifies essentially the entirety of Amhara region as red. Approximately six million Tigrayans live in Tigray, all of which is also red. Approximately one in five Amhara live outside Amhara region, mostly in the cities, where the green zones nominally permit a contested election but where the constitutional formula does not recognise their plurality. Together, these two facts mean that the citizens of two of the four largest national communities will participate in the 1 June election under a double constraint: their home regions are largely under FCDO red advisory, in which the security environment alone makes a free contest implausible; and their dispersed members in the cities and other regions are represented through a constitutional formula whose count was, even before the security collapse, contested.

**The compounded deficit.** If approximately 47% of the population is geographically excluded from a free contest by the FCDO security map (Table 1), and several of the communities most concentrated in those excluded zones are also imperfectly counted by the federation's apportionment formula (Table 2), then the credibility of the 1 June result rests on a base that is doubly weakened. The remedy for the first deficit is the restoration of security; the remedy for the second is a credible new census on a fixed schedule and, more fundamentally, a constitutional formula that gives weight to dispersed communities as well as to territorially concentrated ones. Neither remedy can be supplied by the election itself. The legitimacy of the second mandate, in the years following the ballot, will depend on whether either is supplied at all.

**What honest reform would entail.** The reforms required to address the demographic dimension of the credibility problem are of three kinds and have been argued at greater length elsewhere [45, 46, 47, 48, 49]. The first is a credible new census, conducted by an internationally observed enumeration apparatus, designed to permit independent statistical audit at the regional and woreda level, and published with underlying enumeration data accessible for verification. The second is the resolution of the disputed territories—Welkait, Tegede, Setit-Humera, and Raya—as a legal and historical question rather than an ethnic-plebiscitary one. The path that does not entrench the cycle of force is adjudication through Ethiopian federal constitutional process, with reference to pre-1991 administrative records and to the constitutional rights of all Ethiopian citizens irrespective of which armed actor most recently held the territory. The third is reform of the federal formula itself, to give weight to dispersed national communities through mechanisms (national-roll components, minority-protection thresholds, mother-tongue rights) familiar from the Swiss, Belgian, Indian, and South African federations.

These reforms are difficult. They are also overdue. They cannot be supplied on 1 June. The point of this exhibit is that the credibility of 1 June, and of the second mandate it will confer, will be measured in the years following the ballot by whether the deficits catalogued in Table 1 and Table 2 are addressed by deliberate institutional reform or are allowed to harden into the federation's permanent operating condition. The latter is the path to compounded illegitimacy. The former is the path that the four singular interests with which this article began require.

## B Comparing Sovereign Holding Companies

This annex sets out, in comparative tabular form, the structural variables by which sovereign holding companies in low- and middle-income developmental states are commonly assessed. Temasek and Khazanah are the two East-Asian institutions most often cited as references for the Ethiopian Investment Holdings architecture; their divergent outcomes provide a natural pair of mirrors. The data are drawn from each fund's most recent published report [15, 16, 11], supplemented by World Bank, IFSWF, and academic sources on governance [17, 19, 12, 9, 10].

Table 3: Comparative governance and performance of Temasek (Singapore), Khazanah (Malaysia), and Ethiopian Investment Holdings.

Variable	Temasek (SG, 1974)	Khazanah (MY, 1993)	EIH (ET, 2021)
Founding context	Post-independence consolidation; commercial mandate from inception	Bumiputera economic-empowerment agenda; revamped after 1997 AFC	Post-2018 reform; Council of Ministers Reg. 487/2022
Portfolio value (USD, latest)	~\$290bn (SGD 381bn)	~\$25–35bn (RM 110–150bn)	\$45bn–\$150bn reported (book value of consolidated SOEs; market value not yet audited to comparability standards)
Number of subsidiaries	~30 direct portfolio companies	~80 GLCs (direct and indirect)	~40 SOEs
Compounded annualised TSR since inception	14% SGD / 17% USD over 50 years (20-yr 7%; 10-yr 6%; 1-yr 1.6%)	Not published on comparable basis	Not yet measurable
Sovereign credit rating relevance	Aaa/AAA (Moody's/S&P) on Temasek bonds	Khazanah bonds investment-grade; Malaysia sovereign A3/A-	Sovereign in debt distress since Dec 2023; defaulted on \$1.1bn Eurobond Dec 2024
Board chair	Independent (Mr Lim Boon Heng); not a serving political officeholder	Politically determined; chair has historically been the serving PM or PM-appointed minister	The Prime Minister of Ethiopia (Abiy Ahmed)
Constitutional protection of fund assets	<b>Yes:</b> Singapore President + Council of Presidential Advisers must approve any draw from past reserves	<b>No:</b> subject to ministerial direction and Cabinet decision	<b>No:</b> no independent fiduciary safeguard against executive draw-down
Subsidiary-level financial transparency	Annual published report with subsidiary-level performance disclosure beyond Santiago Principles	Consolidated annual report; subsidiary-level transactions opaque	IFRS adopted (2024); subsidiary-level transparency not yet at Temasek standard
Mandate	Commercial returns; long-term value creation; no ethnic or constituency mandate	Commercial returns + Bumiputera ethnic-redistribution mandate (mixed)	“Entrepreneurial state”; explicit developmental mandate; aim to retain rather than privatise
Notable governance failures	None of comparable scale	1MDB scandal: ~\$4.5bn embezzled from sister vehicle (2009–2015); Khazanah used for \$1.66bn in 1MDB debt service (2016–17)	None established to date; institutional youth precludes confident judgement
Vulnerable to executive succession	Low: independent board and constitutional safeguard insulate against PM change	High: chairmanship and strategic direction reset across government changes	High: mandate tied to incumbent PM as board chair

**Reading the table.** The architecture of Temasek and the architecture of Khazanah differ in three structural variables: constitutional protection of fund assets, board independence from the executive, and subsidiary-level financial transparency. Singapore satisfies all three; Malaysia satisfies none robustly. Ethiopian Investment Holdings, on the available evidence at four years of operation, satisfies none of the three. This does not predict an EIH failure of Khazanah-1MDB scale—the institutional context, the calibre of the leadership, and the underlying assets (Ethiopian Airlines in particular) are different. It does, however, predict that without deliberate institutional reform, EIH will inherit the Malaysian rather than the Singaporean trajectory: politicisation across executive succession, opacity to international counterparties, and a developmental mandate that drifts toward patronage in the absence of external benchmarks.

**The reform menu.** A second-mandate reform agenda for EIH that aimed at the Singaporean rather than the Malaysian trajectory would entail four institutional changes:

1. A constitutional or quasi-constitutional protection of EIH assets requiring an independent fiduciary signature—the President of Ethiopia, an empowered Auditor-General, or a statutory board of guardians—for any draw-down beyond commercially declared dividends.
2. Replacement of the Prime Minister’s chairmanship with an independent chair selected by competitive process and confirmed by Parliament; the PM may retain a residual oversight role analogous to the Singaporean President’s.
3. Subsidiary-level financial reporting on Temasek standards, audited annually by an internationally

accredited firm, with publication of subsidiary-by-subsidary performance against quantitative benchmarks.

4. A published five-year performance and divestment framework: subsidiaries that fail benchmarks for three consecutive years are subject to mandatory restructuring or partial privatisation, with the proceeds returned to a sovereign development fund rather than the general budget.

None of these reforms requires the abandonment of the entrepreneurial-state doctrine that the second mandate has chosen. They require its institutionalisation. The argument of this article is that the choice between Singapore's discipline and Malaysia's drift is a choice that the second mandate is making now, by what it does and does not do, and that the bandwidth available for reversing course narrows with each year that the present architecture is allowed to harden.

### A Personal Note

**My writings are direct.** I do not mean to offend anyone, and no one should be offended. I am also unapologetic about telling what I believe to be the truth; and yet, if our views differ, this is only my view, and it should be treated as such. I remain respectful to individuals, people and institutions but I challenge them all with respect when necessary.

As a child, I was happy to engross myself in the language of God (mathematics) and the laws of the universe (physics). My engineer father and economist mother allowed me to explore these subjects with freedom, as both were themselves fascinated by mathematics. Naturally, I ended up an engineer (of a different kind) like my father, and I continue to debate econometrics with my mother. Mathematics and physics are subjects that direct one toward “what is considered to be the truth” through logic and experiment. There are many subjects with a similar purpose. However, when a better solution is presented, the old truth must be recalibrated against the new and, in some cases, may be rendered redundant.

Having Asperger's syndrome, I found people very difficult to read—particularly their dishonesty, and their inability to see obvious things, especially patterns. The world is full of patterns. I have also had difficulty understanding why people are impulsive enough to participate in things they do not understand. Yet, with all its difficulties, uncertainties, and deceptions, life is a journey to be enjoyed, and more binds humanity together than misunderstanding divides it. I was lucky to pass through the systems of leading institutions, which contributed towards my personal growth and provide me the opportunity to meet people who end up serving their nations and the world at higher offices. Simply put, in addition to striving for our own, we must contribute to society and refrain to dismantle it. Society is, of course, much bigger than individuals, but it is individuals who make up society, and individual responsibility is vital to creating a harmonious society of high competence—those less inclined to exploit others and more inclined to collaborate, growing the pie for all: prosperity.

The individual capacity to think for oneself is the key factor that makes a society and a nation work and progress. We Ethiopians ought to learn taking responsibility as individuals so that our country can continue to progress. Outsourcing our shortcomings to others will not bring an ounce of progress; it will bring chaos, which is in evidence presently.

(Un)Fortunately, I have never been involved in politics, at least not actively—neither campaigning, commenting, nor engaging in activism, primarily because I am duty bound to be impartial. I was not part of the Abiymania of 2018–19, nor of the politics of the Tigray war from 2020, nor of the #NoMore movement (the useful-idiots' collective). In truth, I had no public engagement with Ethiopian politics until recently, when I wrote a series of five articles [45, 46, 47, 48, 49] on GERD, Adwa, and the Red Sea as well as on the impact of the Abraham Accords on the Gulf–Red Sea–Horn geopolitical architecture. I did so at my own risk because I judged this to be the most important development in Ethiopian history—bigger and more dangerous than the moment of Adwa itself.

As an Ethiopian, nothing excites me more than our diversity—of language, culture, religion, and geography—which must be celebrated as an inalienable individual right, neither granted as a blessing nor muddled by anyone. I am proud of our history (imperfect, certainly, as nowhere in the world is) and of our experiment towards a more perfect union grounded in justice, fairness, mutual respect, the rule of law, economic and social development, and democracy. However, I squarely detest the ethnic federalism as currently constituted, which has reduced all Ethiopians to be subservient to ethnic entrepreneurs and encouraged the monkey-habit of fighting over crumbs without knowing what great feast is being enjoyed at the top table.

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