

# National Unity and Red Sea Sovereignty:

*Ethiopia Must Pay the Price Now —*

*By 2050, Ethiopia will have a Population of 225 million, ranking seventh globally.*

Mefkereseb Goytom Hailu (PhD)\*

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## Abstract

This is, for my part — and I pray that my fellow country wo/men have read it attentively — a final contribution to a series of articles in this publication [2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7]. It is written under the press of a fortnight in which the Ethiopian diplomatic landscape appears to be shifting faster than it has shifted in any comparable interval since 2018: *The Ethiopian Tribune's* 12 May essay *The Red Sea Roulette* [1, 8], reading the United States–Ethiopia “Bilateral Structured Dialogue” as exhibition diplomacy staged around three substantive disagreements (GERD, the Sudan war, Red Sea maritime security); IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva’s 11 May visit, with its rare and carefully-calibrated commendation of Ethiopia’s macroeconomic reform [30, 31]; President Emmanuel Macron’s 13 May visit, concluding with a €54.6 million green-energy loan and a renewed European bid for relevance in the Horn [33, 36]; and the Tribune’s 16 May follow-up *The Red Sea Calculus* [8], specifying a reported five-point US-mediated rapprochement framework (Eritrea sanctions relief; a fifty-year Ethiopian port concession at Assab; revival of the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission; mutual disengagement; trade-corridor opening).

*Despite the "mirage of diplomatic cross-hairs", Ethiopia's basic arithmetic remains tied to the four singular interests — now with "National Unity and Red Sea Sovereignty" squarely on the cross-hair.*

The “mirage of diplomatic cross-hairs” names the situation in which a nation believes its foreign policy and soft-power manoeuvring has put an adversary or an ally “in the sights,” but the perception turns out to be a delusion unless backed by *a united polity and military capacity to assert sovereignty and diplomatic credibility*. This article therefore folds the current developments into one proposition that is no longer technical but existential: *Ethiopia, as a nation, does not exist without Unity and Red Sea Sovereignty*. Take either away — by negotiation conducted over Ethiopia’s head, by constitutional drift, by managerial neglect of the federation’s internal coherence — and what remains is a territory with administrators, not a nation with sovereignty.

**The four singular interests are therefore not a menu; they are one proposition in three layers.** *Unity* and *Red Sea Sovereignty* are the **constitutive** foundations of the Ethiopian state; *broad-based economic development anchored in democracy* is the **sustaining**

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\*The author, aka MGH, is a global technical expert trained at the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom. The views expressed are his own and do not represent any institutional position. I acknowledge and appreciate the discussions with Prof. TAH on constitutional law. To editors who prefer Word documents alone, an advance apology is in order, as the manuscript is delivered as a *pdf* compiled from L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X. MGH can be reached via [mefkereseb.hailu1990@gmail.com](mailto:mefkereseb.hailu1990@gmail.com).

**means**; and the *Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam* is the **engine** that makes the means feasible. **Foundations** → **Means** → **Engine**. None of the three layers is severable; none can be traded against another without dissolving the proposition itself.

Two messages follow, and they are the messages with which I leave this series.

**First**, to the federal executive of any partisan composition, and to the next House of People's Representatives: the United States–Egypt–Eritrea triangle now being constructed in Cairo, however generously dressed in fifty-year concessions and resumed boundary commissions, cannot substitute for sovereign coastal access on territory whose status Ethiopia itself settles. The mandate of the next parliament is to *legislate* the four singular interests as the standing constitutional commitment of every administration that succeeds it, on terms that no transient diplomatic arrangement can erode.

**Second**, to Ethiopians at home and in the diaspora: a century and thirty years after Adwa, the polity is asked to choose between paying the price of unity and sovereignty *now*, in coin of its own choosing, or paying a much larger price later, in coin chosen by others. The contention of this article, consistent with the prior pieces [2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7], is that the first price, paid now, is the lower one — and that the failure to pay it would not be a setback. It would, on the available evidence, be the end of the nation.

## 1 The Tribune's Mirror

The Ethiopian Tribune's 12 May essay [1] did the country a service: it put on the page, in plain language, what Ethiopian official communication has been at pains to keep off it — that the recent United States–Ethiopia “Bilateral Structured Dialogue” was, in its essentials, an exhibition in diplomatic theatre constructed to preserve American *option denial* against Iran rather than to advance any Ethiopian interest at all. The piece is correct on three substantive registers, and it sets up what this article must say next.

*On GERD*, “constructive conversations” is diplomatic code for “we disagree profoundly.” The dam is built and operating. Its September 2025 [20] final-configuration inauguration delivered roughly 6.6 TWh per annum; its absolute maximum is 45.1 TWh per annum; its realistic planned output is a 34.8% capacity factor giving 15.7 TWh per annum. Egypt's water security, Ethiopia's developmental imperative and Sudan's vulnerability are each non-negotiable on their own terms; no diplomatic prose dissolves the contradiction. The point the Tribune leaves implicit: the United States has no leverage on the Blue Nile because it has no water in it and no instrument by which Ethiopia's choices can be reversed without a kinetic intervention no American electorate would countenance. *The dam is an accomplished Ethiopian fact.*

*On Sudan*, the Tribune is right that Washington has positioned Ethiopia as a notional broker of a humanitarian truce while the UAE supplies the RSF and Egypt, Russia and assorted Gulf actors back the SAF without sanctions cost commensurate with their material contribution. The diagnostic is now overtaken by events. On 4–5 May 2026 Sudan accused Ethiopia and the UAE of orchestrating a drone strike on Khartoum International Airport, with the Sudanese military stating that drones had been launched from Bahir Dar airport [17, 18]; Sudan recalled its ambassador to Addis Ababa; Egypt and Saudi Arabia condemned the strikes; the Sudanese source quoted by *Mada Masr* read the episode as an Ethiopian effort to “prolong the conflict, exhaust the state and fragment its armed forces.” Whether the accusation is wholly true, wholly false, or somewhere

between, the next federal executive will inherit it on the evening of 1 June.

*On the Red Sea*, the Iran–United States war (Operation Epic Fury [6]) has produced the intermittent closure of the Strait of Hormuz, elevating Bab el-Mandeb to the chokepoint over which the global economy must now circulate [15]. American military repositioning to the African side of the Red Sea has accelerated. Eritrea, Somaliland, Ethiopia and Egypt are now Washington’s indispensable land assets [15, 14]. The substantive content of the bilateral dialogue was therefore not what the State Department’s press release claimed; it was Washington’s quiet test of whether Addis Ababa would consent to be the western-leaning anchor of an American option-denial strategy against Tehran. The price is high: *stability is valued more highly than accountability*.

A single caveat to the Tribune. The piece reads Abiy Ahmed’s posture as a sophisticated form of strategic *non-commitment* — the “art of being simultaneously everyone’s ally and no one’s tool.” Optionality is, however, a tactic, not a strategy. A nation whose leverage rests entirely on multiple powers bidding for its alignment has *no leverage at all* when those powers reach a settlement among themselves. Egypt and the United States are now negotiating such a settlement: Eritrean rehabilitation in exchange for Cairo’s good offices on the Nile, mediated by Boulos, brokered by el-Sisi, sealed by the lifting of the 2021 sanctions on the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) and on Eritrean Defence Forces chief of staff Filipos Woldeyohannes [11, 10, 13]. In that settlement, Ethiopia is a passive object. Optionality has no purchase. Genuine leverage comes from only one source: *a clear, legislatively-anchored, citizen-mandated set of non-negotiable interests, defended by institutions that do not depend on the political fortunes of any particular incumbent*.

### The Boulos–el-Sisi–Isaias triangle, and a respectful note on the mediator

The Wall Street Journal of 23 April 2026 first reported that Senior Advisor Massad Boulos was telling foreign counterparts that the US was preparing to lift some 2021 Eritrea sanctions [9, 13]. Reuters has since sighted an internal State Department note indicating rescission “on or around 4 May” [10]; the analysis has been corroborated by *The Reporter Ethiopia* [15], Eritrea Focus [13], and sharply critical commentary from MEF and AEI under Michael Rubin’s byline [11, 12]. Boulos met Isaias in Cairo in late 2025; he met el-Sisi shortly thereafter, where Egyptian officials appealed to the Trump administration to pressure Ethiopia “to make concessions over its damming of the Blue Nile” [14]. The triangle is plain: an American military repositioning needing the Eritrean coastline; an Egyptian water claim needing Ethiopian concession; an Eritrean rehabilitation needing both.

A clear-eyed reading of the mediator himself, offered without rancour and without ad hominem: Mr Massad Boulos [22, 23] is, by every available account, a capable Lebanese-American businessman whose appointment reflects President Trump’s preference for personal networks over career diplomacy, with a real record on Lebanon’s post-war reconstruction, the late-2024 Israel–Lebanon ceasefire, and the DRC minerals brief [25]. The narrow question is whether he is well-placed to be the principal channel through which Ethiopia’s sovereign-access question is decided in Washington. On six criteria, he is not, and the conclusion is structural rather than personal: (i) *regional expertise* — his geography is the eastern Mediterranean and West Africa, not the Horn; (ii) *dipomatic venue* — his Eritrea engagement is hosted by Cairo [9, 14], which is Ethiopia’s principal

regional adversary on the Nile; (iii) *commercial nexus* — his holdings are in Nigeria, not the Horn; (iv) *ideological orientation* — he is comfortable with the Gulf–Israel–Egypt axis [22], the configuration into which Ethiopia must *not* be passively folded [3, 4, 5, 6]; (v) *appointment mechanism* — his role rests on family proximity to the Trump household [22, 23, 24], which loosens the career-diplomatic disciplines that would otherwise tether him; (vi) *deliverable so far* — the Eritrean rehabilitation initiative now criticised across the spectrum from Human Rights Watch [21] to AEI/MEF [11, 12]. The structure within which he operates makes it implausible that Ethiopian interests will be advanced by his good offices. Ethiopian diplomacy must therefore route around him on substance while remaining cordial on procedure.

### The sovereignty ultimatum, plainly stated

An agreement in which Ethiopian access to the sea is *granted* by an external trilateral process — the United States as guarantor, Egypt as mediator, Eritrea as host — is an agreement that can be *withdrawn* by the same trilateral when the guarantor’s interests change, when the mediator’s calculus shifts, or when the host repudiates the terms. It is not sovereign access. It is access on lease, terminable by parties whose interests are not Ethiopia’s. The first Algiers Agreement was terminated by Eritrean obstruction and Ethiopian refusal in 2002; the second has been overtaken by events. The probability that a third agreement of similar architecture would survive the next regional cycle is low.

The probability that the alternative — a sovereign Ethiopian outlet on territory whose status is settled by Ethiopian arms or Ethiopian diplomacy on Ethiopian terms [5, 6] — would prove durable is, on the historical record, higher. The shortest form of the underlying proposition is the one I borrowed from Article 51 of the United Nations Charter: *the inherent right of self-defence is not a privilege extended by external benefactors*. The instant Ethiopia accepts the means and the claim for its access to international waters is a question for outsiders to settle, **Ethiopia has ceased to be a sovereign actor on the question.**

## 2 The fortnight that changed everything — and changed nothing

Between 11 and 16 May 2026, three events compressed into a single news cycle reshaped the diplomatic surface of the Ethiopian moment. They demand careful reading not because each is, on its own, transformative, but because their conjunction has produced the political theatre in which the proposition of this article must now be argued.

*The IMF’s benediction (11 May)*. Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva concluded a working visit to Addis Ababa with a public commendation: “At a difficult time, Ethiopia is making impressive progress on an ambitious economic reform program” [30]. The IMF’s April 2026 World Economic Outlook projects Ethiopia at 9.2% real GDP growth for 2026 — the fastest in sub-Saharan Africa — with inflation easing to 11.8% [31, 32]. The Home-Grown Economic Reform Agenda (HERA), under the four-year \$3.4 billion Extended Credit Facility concluded in July 2024, has now passed mid-programme. Georgieva’s parallel warning against energy subsidies and broad-based tax cuts [31] tells fiscal authorities, in a language they and the bond market understand, that confidence is contingent on orthodox stabilisation, not on its dilution under election-cycle pressures. The benediction is real but conditional.

*Macron in Addis Ababa (13 May)*. The President arrived for his third official visit since 2019 [34], was received by PM Abiy Ahmed, and proceeded to a trilateral at AU headquarters with UN Secretary-General António Guterres and AUC Chairperson Mahmoud Ali Youssouf [33, 35]. Deliverables: a €54.6 million loan supporting Ethiopia’s Renewable, Integrated, Sustainable Energy and Digitalization Program; a 150 MW geothermal PPP framework; and a broader \$27 billion

Africa-Forward Summit mobilisation [36, 33]. *Two factual corrections worth noting for the discipline of this series.* The headline loan has been reported as “€63.9 million” in some Ethiopian and English outlets; the primary record gives €54.6 million [36], with the “\$63.9 million” AP figure reflecting a currency artefact. The Ethiopia–France strategic-partnership formalisation, signed by Defence Minister Aisha Mohammed and Ambassador Alexis Lamek, is on the verifiable record *March 2026*, not February [34]. What Macron’s visit signified is, however, clearer than these fine points. France is hedging in a register that recognises European relevance in Africa is now contested by American, Chinese, Gulf and Turkish power-projection. The Ambassador’s public reaffirmation, on 15 May, that Ethiopia’s pursuit of diversified maritime access is “perfectly legitimate” [37, 38] is the same diplomatic register Macron himself used in December 2024. The French position is not American; it is a parallel track: investment, institutional partnership, and explicit support for the *legitimacy* of Ethiopia’s coastal claim, conditioned on peaceful means.

*The Tribune’s Calculus (16 May).* The Tribune editor reports — on the basis of “diplomatic channels and official communications” — a five-point framework [8]: (1) lifting of the 2021 Executive Order 14046 sanctions on Eritrean military, PFDJ and senior officials; (2) a fifty-year, exclusive or preferential Ethiopian commercial access to the Port of Assab; (3) revival of the dormant Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission under the 2000 Algiers Agreement to demarcate the 912-kilometre border; (4) mutual disengagement from destabilising acts; and (5) normalisation, with reopened civilian transit and bilateral trade. *Provenance caveat.* The specific five-point composition has not been corroborated independently of the Tribune piece. The sanctions-lifting element is established [9, 10]; the fifty-year Assab number in particular is the Tribune editor’s reconstruction. What can be said is that the *shape* of the framework matches the Boulos–el-Sisi–Isaias triangle that has been independently reported.

#### What the Tribune’s Calculus correctly identified.

The piece is right to flag three unresolved questions: the *naval-base* question (commercial access at Assab is not a base, and Eritrea will not consent to one); the *Sudan* question (the framework assumes regional stability that the SAF–RSF war and the 5 May Bahir Dar drone allegations [16, 17, 19] actively contest); and the *Egyptian-encirclement* question (Cairo brokers because the framework constrains Ethiopia’s GERD position, not in spite of it). From the point of view of the *four singular interests*, I would like to point out what the Tribune underweights as a structural point: a fifty-year concession is, by its nature, a *lease*. The territory remains Eritrean; the terms remain renegotiable on schedules Asmara, not Addis Ababa, controls. It is genuinely useful in the short-to-medium term and should be welcomed as interim, but it is *not* sovereign access on the Doumeira–Beilul strip [5, 6], and it does not substitute for the constitutional anchor proposed in §5. To treat it as a substitute is to confuse the lease for the title.

*The underlying observation: shape over substance.* The IMF benediction does not alter the structural composition of the Ethiopian economy. The Macron visit does not alter the European strategic posture. The five-point framework does not alter the underlying Ethiopian position — the constitutional anchor (or lack of it) for the four singular interests, the federation’s internal coherence, the credibility of any Ethiopian threat to enforce the Doumeira–Beilul claim if diplomatic means are exhausted. What these events have done, in conjunction, is to produce a *political theatre in which the executive can credibly claim that managed diplomacy is delivering*. It is precisely this credibility — as honest as it is performative — that makes the proposition of this article more urgent, not less. A warm diplomatic fortnight is exactly the political environment in which the constitutional anchor of the four singular interests is least likely to be legislated, because it appears unnecessary.

### 3 The four singular interests are one architecture

Across the six prior pieces in this series [2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7] I argued that Ethiopia’s strategic position rests on four singular interests that cannot be traded against one another. The list-form is no longer adequate. The four are not items on a menu; they are a single proposition in three layers:

- **Unity and Red Sea Sovereignty** are the *constitutive* foundations of the Ethiopian state. Take either away and what remains is a territory with administrators, not a nation with sovereignty. A federation contested simultaneously by the OLA in Oromia, the Fano constellation in Amhara, and residual TDF capacity in Tigray [7, 20] has no negotiating leverage on the coast; a landlocked polity whose sole port can be closed by a single neighbour has no autonomous defence posture. The two interests are not separate; they are the two sides of the question of whether the Ethiopian nation exists at all.
- **Broad-based economic development anchored in democracy** is the *sustaining means*. Prosperity without sovereignty is the historical condition of the protectorate; sustained sovereignty without broad-based prosperity is the historical condition of the failed state. The democratic anchor matters because the alternatives — patronage capture, regional clientelism, technocratic authoritarianism — have, in Ethiopian state-formation, eroded both consent and capacity.
- **The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam** is the *engine*. Its planned 15.7 TWh per annum can power the electrification, urbanisation and manufacturing competitiveness on which roughly eighty-six million Ethiopians under thirty depend for any livelihood other than agricultural subsistence [7]. The engine matters only as it powers the means; the means matters only as it sustains the foundations.

#### The proposition this article rests on, in its final form.

*Ethiopia, as a nation, does not exist without Unity and Red Sea Sovereignty.* Broad-based economic development anchored in democracy is the means by which that nation is sustained; the GERD is the engine that makes the means feasible. The four singular interests are therefore not four; they are one — a single architecture in three layers. The 1 June ballot is meaningful to the extent that, and only to the extent that, the next House of People’s Representatives is mandated to legislate that architecture into the supreme law of the federation, on terms no diplomatic readout can erode. The cost of paying this price now, in coin Ethiopians themselves choose, is lower than the cost of paying a larger price later, in coin chosen by others. The failure to pay it would, on the available evidence, be the end of the nation.

The four interests are a single argument running in one direction: **Foundations** → **Means** → **Engine**. They are not severable. To accept a *fifty-year Assab lease without the constitutional anchor on Red Sea Sovereignty* is not partial acceptance; *it is the formal abandonment of the proposition*. To accept 9.2% GDP growth [31, 32] without addressing the *regional-administration concentration of land-allocation power and the constitutional incentive structure that produces ethnic-entrepreneurship* [27, 28] is not partial broad-based development; *it is the trading of broad-based development for managerial macroeconomic performance*. To accept *federal cohesion without the legislative anchor* that places federation-integrity beyond the reach of the next “referendum on the smell of the season” is not partial unity; *it is deferral of the unity question* to the next Article 39 invocation, on terms the invoker controls.

## 4 Red Sea Sovereignty: neither granted nor brokered

I have set out the historical, legal and strategic case for Red Sea Sovereignty at length in the four Abraham Accords sequels [3, 4, 5, 6] and in §10 of the June 2026 article [7]. I will not rehearse it here. I want only to draw out four propositions in the language of the present moment.

*Proposition 1: self-defence is not a privilege.* Article 51 of the UN Charter affirms that the right is *inherent* — antecedent to and not derived from external sanction, recognition or licence. American or European discomfort with how Ethiopia chooses to defend its strategic depth is a diplomatic problem to be managed, not a legal instrument by which Ethiopia's defence calculus can be vetoed.

*Proposition 2: nobody outside Ethiopia decides the Ethiopian sea question.*

- *Not the United States.* Washington's interest in Ethiopian coastal access is contingent on Iranian denial and will recalibrate when the geopolitics of containment shifts. There is, however, a *partner-quality* argument that ought to be on the American table: on the merits of Washington's own stated objective — containing Houthi maritime aggression off Yemen and denying Iranian Bab el-Mandeb access — Ethiopia is structurally the superior partner. Its population (130 million), standing armed forces, industrial capacity, institutional continuity and strategic depth dwarf Eritrea's by an order of magnitude. The two-hundred-kilometre Doumeira–Beilul stretch [5, 6] is a narrower coastal strip than Eritrea's upper littoral but it sits directly opposite the Yemeni coast, commands the African shoulder of Bab el-Mandeb, and a credible Ethiopian military presence on it would contain Houthi aggression at a level of effectiveness Asmara has not delivered in thirty years of trying. That this argument is not currently being heard in Washington reflects Egyptian opposition and Saudi alignment with Cairo — pressures *managed, not eliminated*, by the present Boulos–el-Sisi–Isaias arrangement.
- *Not the United Arab Emirates.* Abu Dhabi's interests — food security, Red Sea logistics, regional containment of Iranian and Brotherhood-aligned currents — overlap with Ethiopia's only contingently. The 5 May allegation that UAE-supplied drones launched from Bahir Dar struck Khartoum [17, 16, 19] is a reminder that interest-overlap can rapidly become interest-mismatch, and that Ethiopia, in any such scenario, bears costs the partner does not.
- *Not Israel, not Egypt, not Eritrea, not Iran.* Israel's Horn engagement [3] is contingent on the Israeli theatre, not the Ethiopian one. Egypt facilitates the Boulos–Isaias channel precisely because it benefits from a strengthened Eritrea opposite a weakened Ethiopia. Asmara is built on the proposition that an Ethiopia with sovereign coastal access is an Ethiopia in which Eritrea cannot survive as currently constituted. Tehran's door is presently ajar [1] but its Red Sea reach is contested by the very war the bilateral was constructed around; the prevailing US/Israeli projection is that Epic Fury will degrade Iran out of the equation [6] but a second scenario — Iran emerging damaged but politically consolidated, with Hormuz under firmer control and renewed incentive to project across Bab el-Mandeb — is not zero-probability. A prudent posture prepares for both.
- *Not the African Union, not the international community.* The AU has not, on the record, earned the standing to adjudicate the question [7, 6].

*Proposition 3: the only durable settlement is one anchored in Ethiopian institutions.* An agreement on coastal access that survives the next regional cycle must be anchored in Ethiopian constitutional and legislative instruments that cannot be revised by a change of mood in any external capital. Diplomacy without a domestic anchor is a coat without a hook.

*Proposition 4: the historical case stands.* The historical foundations of the claim — from Aksum through Amde Tsion, through the imperial coastline of the late nineteenth century, through the 1952 UN-deliberated federation, through the 1962 abrogation that began the long unwinding [7] — license an Ethiopian claim to sovereign coastal access on approximately 180–200 km from the Doumeira Mountains to Beilul [5, 6]. The claim is contingent only on Ethiopia’s willingness to assert and defend it.

#### What the next House of People’s Representatives must legislate.

A standing constitutional mandate that (a) affirms Ethiopia’s inherent right of self-defence under UN Charter Article 51; (b) declares Red Sea sovereign coastal access a non-negotiable national interest; (c) commits the federal executive, of any partisan composition, to the patient, lawful, and where necessary forceful pursuit of that access on terms Ethiopia itself sets; (d) provides parliamentary oversight of any agreement with external partners that touches on the question, with veto power vested in the elected legislature; and (e) entrenches the framework as a special law that no ordinary majority can repeal.

## 5 It is the constitution, stupid!

A legislative pledge is necessary but not, by itself, sufficient. A Standing Mandate Act passed by an ordinary majority can be repealed by an ordinary majority. The four singular interests need a constitutional anchor that ordinary legislative cycles cannot erode.

I have argued in the prior election article [7] that the central diagnostic on Ethiopia’s predicament is not personality, not policy, not the misfortune of a difficult neighbourhood: **it is the constitution, stupid!** That diagnosis must be carried into this section without softening. The FDRE Constitution did, on its face, deliver certain gains some commentators count: equal language recognition, formal end of imperial and Derg-era centralism, a written rights chapter conforming to the UDHR and ICCPR via Article 13. None of those gains required the structural defect this section is about. Linguistic and cultural recognition can be secured under almost any constitutional architecture; rights chapters are present in most contemporary constitutions and are not what makes the FDRE instrument unusual. What makes it unusual — indeed almost without parallel in contemporary federal practice — is the combination of group-vested sovereignty (Article 8), an unconditional right of regional secession (Article 39(1)<sup>1</sup>), and an ethno-territorial federation (Article 47) protected behind the most rigid amendment procedure available (Article 105(1)).

**This combination is the weakest cleavage along which the Ethiopian state can be dismembered**, and it is the cleavage every external interest with a stake in Ethiopia’s weakness — and a number of internal ones — has spent the past three decades widening. **To call this constitution wise, or even adequate, is to mistake the parade ground for the battlefield.** It permits regions to cede “when they do not like the smell of the season”; it places the federation’s

<sup>1</sup>A subject that my wife, a constitutional law professor and a practising barrister, could not begin to understand — why a nation would intentionally codify its suicide in its constitution, describing Article 39 as a “novel idea”, an English euphemism for stupidity.

integrity on a permanent referendum that any sufficiently mobilised regional entrepreneur can invoke; and it offers no constitutional anchor for the four singular interests. The Policy Studies Institute’s 2022 survey found that more than 75% of respondents support amending Article 39 [27]. The argument is not new and it is not fringe. The arguments below are arguments for amendment, on terms set by Ethiopians; the alternative is dismemberment, on terms set by others.

**Sovereignty residence (Preamble, Article 8, 39(5)).** “We, the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia” [26] vests sovereignty in the group, with the individual citizen as derived. The standard formulation in constitutional democracies (US 1787, France 1958, South Africa 1996) vests sovereignty in the demos understood as a body of equal individual citizens.

*Amendment (radical):* reword the Preamble to “We, the people of Ethiopia, comprising our diverse Nations, Nationalities and Peoples”, and amend Article 8(1) to vest sovereignty in “the people of Ethiopia,” with NNP cultural, linguistic and self-government rights exercised *within and not above* that sovereignty.

**Article 39: the right to secession.** No other federal democracy in contemporary practice recognises an *unconditional* right of regional secession. Canada (Clarity Act, 2000), Spain (Constitutional Court, 2017), the United States since *Texas v. White* (1869), India and Germany — none of them permit unilateral secession; each requires negotiation and a constitutional amendment by the whole federation. **Ethiopia, on Article 39, stands almost alone.** The provision creates a permanent incentive for regional entrepreneurs to escalate grievances toward the secession threshold rather than resolve them within the federation [27, 28].

*Three amendment options, ascending in severity. Minimum:* repeal “unconditional” and add a two-thirds HoPR vote plus a national referendum carrying majorities in two-thirds of constituent states. *Intermediate:* replace “including the right to secession” with “within the framework of the FDRE,” preserving internal self-determination but removing the constitutional grant of secession — aligning Ethiopia with the international standard. *Radical:* repeal Article 39(1) entirely and replace with a provision affirming NNP cultural, linguistic, administrative and political self-government *within* the constitutional framework, with no provision for secession.

**Article 2: the missing maritime claim.** Article 2 codifies Ethiopia’s loss of its historic Red Sea coastline in the supreme law of the land, with three omissions: no affirmation of UN Charter Article 51 self-defence; no national-interest declaration on access to international waters; no parliamentary check on future international agreements that further restrict the territorial position. *The current constitution as it stands reads as a constitution authored by unconsciously incompetent foreign agents, who believed they have firm ideology on their side.*

*Amendment (intermediate):* insert Article 2(2) recognising the inherent right of self-defence under UN Charter Article 51, declaring sovereign access to international waters a vital national interest pursued by peaceful and lawful means and defended by the federal armed forces under Article 87; insert Article 2(3) requiring two-thirds HoPR ratification of any international agreement modifying territorial jurisdiction or access to international waters.

**Articles 40, 51, 89: economic foundations.** Article 40(3)'s state-land ownership, coupled with Article 52(2)(d)'s grant of state-level administration, produces persistent tenure ambiguity that constrains the asset-backed credit on which broad-based rural prosperity depends. Article 51(11) is the constitutional anchor of the GERD claim but is not paired with protection of federal infrastructure against regional disruption. Article 89's economic objectives are aspirational and unenforceable.

*Amendments (intermediate):* permit a category of secured private leasehold of agricultural and commercial land for productive purposes alongside existing communal tenure, with safeguards against concentration and displacement; add Article 51 sub-articles protecting federally-funded strategic infrastructure from regional disruption and giving the federal government exclusive jurisdiction over GERD and the high-voltage grid; convert Article 89 from aspirational to enforceable by appending a 100-day post-election legislative requirement on industrial employment, small-holder productivity and credit-access targets subject to annual parliamentary review.

**Article 47: the ethno-territorial architecture.** The most contested constitutional question in Ethiopia. The case for ethno-territorial design gave constitutional voice to communities long marginalised; the case against, made by the PSI survey [27], is that it has institutionalised the very ethnic salience it was meant to manage.

*Amendment (radical, long-horizon):* establish, by ordinary act of the next HoPR, a Constitutional Review Commission with a five-year mandate to study, consult on and propose alternatives to Article 47 — including civic-territorial federalism on geographic lines, hybrid models, and the status quo — with the Commission's report put to a federation-wide referendum under Article 105 procedures.

**Article 87: the armed forces.** The principles (composition reflecting NNP at 87(1), sovereignty protection at 87(3), constitutional obedience at 87(4), non-partisanship at 87(5)) are sound. The defects are silences: no professional, meritocratic officer corps; no maritime mandate; no standing-army doctrine.

*Amendment (modest):* add sub-articles affirming a meritocratic officer corps subject to statutory criteria; an explicit maritime element to the defence mandate; and a standing-army structure with statutory reserves and federal–state coordination.

**Articles 104–105: amending the constitution itself.** The most fundamental provisions are protected behind the most demanding procedure, and the House of the Federation (organised on NNP lines under Article 61) holds an effective veto over reform of ethnic-particularist provisions [29].

*Amendment (modest but consequential):* reform Article 105 so that amendments outside the rights chapter require (a) two-thirds of the HoPR, (b) a majority of the House of the Federation, and (c) a federation-wide referendum carrying majorities in at least two-thirds of constituent states. This removes the absolute regional-council veto while preserving the demanding threshold on rights-chapter provisions, and adds a direct popular check.

### The constitutional package, in summary

The four singular interests do not require the abolition of the FDRE Constitution. They require targeted, lawful, citizen-mandated amendments to: (i) Preamble and Article 8 — civic-individual sovereignty alongside cultural-group recognition; (ii) Article 39 — removing or substantially conditioning unconditional secession; (iii) Article 2 — affirmative national-interest declaration on sovereign maritime access plus parliamentary veto on territorial agreements; (iv) Articles 40, 51, 89 — secured private leasehold, protection of strategic federal infrastructure, enforceable economic objectives; (v) Article 47 — Constitutional Review Commission with five-year mandate; (vi) Article 87 — professional, maritime and standing-army commitments; (vii) Article 105 — relaxing the regional veto outside the rights chapter, adding a direct popular referendum. Each is achievable under the Constitution's own procedures. I have benefited on advice from constitutional lawyers and (Swiss) federalism specialists; the detailed drafting is a task for the years following 1 June. What the weeks before it must produce is the cross-party pledge to undertake the work.

## 6 The cross-party legislative pledge

The partisan outcome of the 1 June ballot is not, as the prior election article argued [7], a meaningful variable: the Prosperity Party will return; surprise local victories will not aggregate to a national alternative; security conditions, the contested demographic enumeration, and opposition fragmentation close the question of partisan outcome before it is opened.

### The cross-party legislative pledge this article proposes.

Every party fielding candidates on 1 June 2026 should be asked, in writing and on the public record, to commit to a single legislative undertaking: that regardless of which party forms the government, the new House will, within its first one hundred days, pass into law a *Standing Mandate Act of the Four Singular Interests* — as one proposition in three layers, namely:

- **Constitutive foundations: Unity and Red Sea Sovereignty.** Internal cohesion under the rule of law as the pillar without which no other interest can be defended; Red Sea Sovereignty as a self-defence question before it is a commercial one. The two are not separable; together they are the question of whether the Ethiopian nation exists at all.
- **Sustaining means: broad-based economic development anchored in democracy.** Macroeconomic indicators converted into household livelihoods — rural smallholders, urban informal workers, manufacturing wage labour — through institutions that outlast any incumbent.
- **Engine: the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.** Anchor infrastructure for the industrialisation and urbanisation the sustaining means must accommodate; powering the broad base, not the connected few.

**Foundations → Means → Engine.** The architecture runs in one direction; none of the three layers is severable; none can be traded against another without dissolving the proposition. The technical content of the Act — the constitutional amendments that lock the architecture into the supreme law of the federation — is the package of §5. The Prosperity Party should be asked. The Sidama Unity Party should be asked. The Amhara and Oromo formations should be asked. The cross-cutting civic parties should be asked. Each refusal should be recorded; each commitment should be recorded; and the citizen, whatever the security environment of her constituency permits, should vote on the basis of those commitments rather than the personalities offering them.

The question that *is* open is what the next House of People's Representatives will be *instructed to legislate*. On this question, the citizen retains agency; opposition parties retain agency; even ruling-party backbenchers, in the moments after the election when patronage discipline is at its lowest ebb, retain agency. The legislative undertaking proposed below must mirror, in its very form, the architecture argued for in §3: *one proposition in three layers*, not four items on a menu.

The point of the pledge is not to bind the executive in the strict legal sense; it is to make the cost of repudiating it politically visible. A House that has been given a public, on-the-record, cross-party undertaking cannot, four years later, plausibly claim it had no mandate. The diaspora, with comparatively modest funding, could maintain a public register of which candidates pledged what.

## 7 Adwa: commemoration and the global moment that is closing

For more than a century, Ethiopians have commemorated Adwa [2]. The commemoration has been a source of dignity. It has also been, in its worse registers, a substitute for the patient institutional work that 1 March 1896 made possible but did not itself perform. Menelik defeated an Italian army; he did not build the rule-of-law institutions, the constitutional architecture, the integrated economic order, or the federal cohesion a sovereign Ethiopia in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries would require.

### The redemption proposition.

The redemption of Adwa is not commemoration. It is the patient, generation-long, institutional work of building the country in which the 1896 victory was meant to make democracy possible: a country whose sovereignty is its own to defend, whose institutions outlast its incumbents, whose constitution makes the individual citizen the unit of sovereignty rather than the group, whose federation rests on civic foundations rather than ethnic patronage, whose economic order lifts the broad base, and whose foreign policy is informed by diplomacy without being dictated by it. Anything less is what I will, with respect to those who will be offended by the term, call *twenty-first-century slavery* — not the historical chattel slavery of African bodies, but the older Aristotelian one: the polity that has lost the capacity to act on its own ends because its ends are being set elsewhere. It is recoverable. However, recovery requires one to first acknowledge the condition.

The wider world has changed. The post-1945 institutional order — the UN, Bretton Woods, the multilateral trade architecture, the AU — is in visible institutional erosion [6]. The norms that nominally constrained great-power behaviour have been tested to destruction in Ukraine, Gaza, the South China Sea, and the Iranian theatre. To this is added a second discontinuity: the advent of artificial intelligence at scale — be it the LLM/Generative/Agentic family the common reader now marvels at, or the fast-advancing and more impactful Edge/Physical-AI deployment frontier — which is reordering the global division of labour, national defence, governance, and the basis of political legitimacy. The smaller polity that has not, by the time the next decade closes, built sovereign institutions in those domains will be a polity whose autonomy is conditioned by those that have. Sovereignty, in the world taking shape, will not be conferred by the goodwill of patrons. It will be exercised by polities that have built the institutional foundations of self-governance before the previous order completes its present recession. The four singular interests are not a regional Horn concern; they are the local form of a global question every polity of Ethiopia's size is now being forced to answer. Let's not forget, Ethiopia is projected to have a young population of 225 million by 2050, ranking at seventh globally.

## 8 A stern warning, addressed to two audiences

**To the federal executive, however constituted after 1 June.** The temptation that has shadowed the first mandate, and that will be heightened in the second, is to treat Red Sea Sov-

ereignty as something to be *managed* through external relationships rather than *settled* through Ethiopian institutional and constitutional instruments. The temptation is understandable. It is also fatal. **A federal executive that accepts the Boulos–el-Sisi–Isaias triangle as the operating environment** within which the Ethiopian sea question must be resolved has, by that acceptance, **surrendered the question**. The arrangement may produce, in the short term, a negotiated access of some kind — a Saudi-backed concession at a corner of Assab, a leased terminal at Massawa, a managed transit through Djibouti. Each will be revoked when the underlying calculus shifts. **None of them constitutes sovereignty**. The federal executive must commit, in the public record before 1 June and in legislation after it, to a three-component posture: *no external veto* on the Ethiopian self-defence claim is admissible by any capital; *no agreement on sovereign coastal access* is to be concluded without parliamentary ratification under §4; *the armed forces*, reconstructed on the professional and constitutional foundations of the prior election article [7], must be capable of defending an Ethiopian claim that diplomacy cannot secure, on a timetable Ethiopia sets. None of these three components is rhetorical. Each must be reduced to legislation.

#### The blunt message.

**The blunt message.** The global order is on shaky ground. The advent of AI at scale is reordering the basis of national power. The capacity of external benefactors to deliver sovereignty to small and medium powers is contracting, and the willingness of those benefactors to do so on terms favourable to the receiving polity is contracting faster. In this environment, the only sure things are unity, sovereignty, the rule of law, and the institutions that make democratic governance the capstone of a building whose foundations have been laid. For Ethiopia, those foundations are the architecture set out in §3: Unity and Red Sea Sovereignty as constitutive, broad-based economic development anchored in democracy as the sustaining means, the GERD as the engine. People or governments that believe their interest — particularly their sovereignty — can be served by other nations' blessings are the most easily betrayed. The hard truth, and the redemption available to us, is that no one is coming to do this for us. We must do it ourselves.

**To Ethiopian citizens, at home and in the diaspora.** The temptation has been *outsourced redemption* — the hope that external intervention, whether by Washington, Brussels, the AU, or some combination, will deliver to Ethiopians what Ethiopians have not built for themselves. The hope is older than the federation. It is also unfounded. No external actor has, in the past century, delivered to a country of Ethiopia's scale and complexity the sovereign institutions on which its survival depends. The Italian invaders did not. The British administrators (1941–1952) did not. The American patrons (1953–1974) did not. The Soviet sponsors (1977–1991) did not. The Western donor community (1991–2018) did not. The Chinese infrastructure partners (2010–present) have not, and were never positioned to. Each external relationship contributed something; none of them substituted for the institutional work only Ethiopians can perform. The citizen's discipline is therefore neither new nor glamorous: to vote even under conditions of foreknown outcome (a higher participation rate constrains the incumbent who must then deliver on the mandate); to support those who campaign under harassment with money, time and the simple act of public association; to hold our own intellectual heroes to the same standards we apply to those we oppose; to use diaspora platforms to narrow rather than to widen the gap, in the register of *shimagilles* rather than of prosecutors.

## 9 Conclusion: pay the price now, in coin we choose

The Tribune’s framing of the bilateral as a roulette is accurate, but the metaphor has one implication the piece does not quite name: the player at a roulette table can choose colours but not the rules of the table. The table is set by the casino. The casino is not Ethiopia. The casino is a configuration of external interests — American, Egyptian, Eritrean, Israeli, Emirati, Iranian, and now French and European — whose strategic concerns intersect with Ethiopia’s only contingently. The IMF benediction of 11 May, the Macron visit of 13 May, and the further specification on 16 May of the five-point framework [30, 33, 8] are, on the most generous reading, helpful tactical instruments — and on the analysis offered above, the political environment in which the legislative anchor is most likely to be deferred because it appears unnecessary. *The danger of the present fortnight is precisely its warmth.*

The redemption available is not to play the roulette wheel better; it is to refuse the table. The refusal is institutional: a Standing Mandate Act of the Four Singular Interests, made by the next HoPR within its first one hundred days, that legislates Unity and Red Sea Sovereignty as the constitutive foundations of the nation, broad-based democratic economic development as the sustaining means, and the GERD as the engine that makes the means feasible — as a single architecture, in three layers, on terms no diplomatic readout can erode. The instrument of the refusal is not military force; it is the rule of law, exercised through institutions that outlast the incumbents who sit in them. Adwa was a battle won by force of arms in a single day. The redemption of Adwa is a country built by institutional discipline over a generation.

### Ethiopia, as a nation, does not exist without Unity and Red Sea Sovereignty

To accept anything less — such as a fifty-year lease at Assab in lieu of sovereign coastal access on Doumeira–Beilul; a managed macroeconomic stabilisation that delivers 9.2% GDP growth [31, 32] without the constitutional architecture to convert growth into broad-based development; a federation whose integrity is contingent on the next invocation of Article 39 — is to accept the formal dissolution of the proposition that Ethiopia is a sovereign nation. The price is high. It is also, on every comparison I have been able to make, lower than the price that will be paid if the proposition is allowed to lapse. The polities of comparable size and complexity that have dissolved in living memory — Yugoslavia, Sudan, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union — did not dissolve because their populations chose dissolution. They dissolved because the constitutional architecture in which their unity was embedded ceased, at a particular moment, to bind. The architecture of the FDRE Constitution, as §5 has set out, is more brittle than any of the four cases above.

**To the prime minister:** — with the courtesy his office and his evident strategic capacity deserve. The second mandate is, in the four singular interests, an opportunity to be remembered as the executive who built the institutions of a sovereign Ethiopia, rather than the executive who managed its decline through skilful optionality in the warm light of fifty-year leases. The choice is, as always, available.

**To the citizen:** — with the respect that the cost of opposition activity in present-day Ethiopia demands. Vote with courage and fortitude; pledge nothing you cannot defend; defend everything you have pledged; and remember that the work after 1 June is longer, harder, and more important than the work before it.

**My own final words:** What I can do, having said what I have to say, is to leave the work in the hands of those better placed to carry it forward: the constitutional lawyers and federalism

specialists I am not; the political negotiators and parliamentary draftsmen I am not; the citizens of every community of the federation whose stake in the answer is greater than mine. The work is unfinished. The work is doable. The work cannot be subcontracted. *For Unity and Red Sea Sovereignty*, Ethiopia must pay all the price now, in coin we choose, while the choice is still available to us — it is closing quite rapidly.

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This article is part of a continuing series in the *Ethiopian Tribune* comprising, as of 16 May 2026: [2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 1, 8], and the present piece. Readers are invited to engage critically with each at the addresses cited.

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