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A critique of building a developmental state in the EPRDF's Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the main features of Ethiopia's 'developmental state' and takes a critical look at how the model is applied in practice, capturing parallels and contradictions through comparative evidence with that of the East Asia model. Accordingly, it notes that the East Asian model has a strong ideological influence on the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime, allowing it to formulate a strong vision of development, but this, although it contributed to economic growth, failed to ensure democracy and stability in the country. It argues that land grabbing and political instability are the biggest threats to Ethiopia's development prospects.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine les principales caractéristiques de l'« État en développement » en Éthiopie, et porte un regard critique sur la manière dont ce modèle est appliqué. Nous y effectuons une comparaison avec le modèle de l'Asie de l'Est, et en tirons des parallèles et des contradictions entre ces deux modèles. Nous notons ainsi que le modèle de l'Asie de l'Est a une forte influence idéologique sur le régime du Front démocratique révolutionnaire du peuple éthiopien (FDRPE), lui donnant les outils pour formuler une conception solide du développement. Mais, bien que cette approche ait contribué à la croissance économique, elle ne lui a pas permis de garantir le maintien de la démocratie et de la stabilité au niveau national. Nous en concluons que l'accaparement des terres et l'instabilité politique sont les plus grands freins aux perspectives de développement en Éthiopie.

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Introduction

Many scholars argue that Ethiopia provides the most significant example of attempts to implement the idea of a developmental state with an 'Ethiopian flavour' in Africa under the defunct Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (Clapham 2018; De Waal 2013; Hauge and Chang 2019). International media also published several articles on Ethiopia's economic growth, highlighting how the country has been trying to emulate an East Asian-style model from which the concept of the

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developmental state emerged (Bloomberg 2018). For some, this is not surprising given the fact that the country made progress in economic growth over the decades, drawing inspiration from East Asian experiences. For others, however, this model, supposedly based on East Asian experience, not only demonstrated flaws in its practice, but often runs counter to the country's democratic aspirations and federalism.

This article explores the main features of Ethiopia's 'developmental state' and takes a critical look at how the model is applied in practice and attempts to capture its conceptual understanding to see how Ethiopia does it. The view in the developmental state approach is that the key to rapid growth and economic transformation is centralised decision-making, commitment to development and poverty eradication, massive investment, and an autonomous and capable bureaucracy (Mkandawire 2001).

In Ethiopia, the emergence of the developmental state can be seen in three contexts. First, as Clapham (2006) explained, it can be seen as part of the 'emulation policy' of the successive Ethiopian regimes, which began with imitation of Imperial Russia as the first model of modernisation in the mid-nineteenth century and continues to this day. The EPRDF sought to formally adopt the development paths of East Asian countries since the turn of the new millennium. But the changes from 2018 seem to have shifted to the West, marking a departure from the East Asian emulated governing ideology previously adopted by the EPRDF. In this sense, this article reflects the need to delink the country from the trends of wholesale transplantation of theories and models from outside, appreciating the contradictions between aspirations and practical realities.

Second, the emergence of a developmental state in Ethiopia was part of a widespread global response to the failure of neoliberalism in Africa, leading to a reappraisal of development approaches (Di Nunzio 2015, 1182). Zenawi (2012) argued that the liberal paradigm has come to a dead end as a mode of African development, and the new developmental state approach is the most viable alternative. This paved the way for Ethiopia's ambitious plans to transition to a middle-income economy by 2025. This demonstrated that the developmental state was one of the two pillars of the Ethiopian renaissance, and democratic federalism was the other pillar.

With the adoption of two consecutive growth and transformation plans in 2010 and 2015, Ethiopia shown steady economic growth over a decade, averaging about 10 per cent per year, including expanding access to education, road and rail infrastructure, an increase in the country's average income, and doubling the proportion of people with access to electricity (Shiferaw 2017). Despite these impressive results, Ethiopia not only has a long way to go before becoming a middle-income country, but studies confirmed that the EPRDF regime did not make progress in building democratic structures (Hagmann and Reyntjens 2016).

As a result, the country faced an unprecedented political crisis that, since 2014, has led to public protests against the expansion of the capital city, which is a microcosm of the regime's morbid 'development' model founded on a policy of leasing millions of hectares of land to investors. This resulted in large-scale land grabs, evictions and human rights violations that contributed to political repression under the guise of development (Hagmann and Reyntjens 2016). This revealed that the EPRDF's interest in building a developmental state and deepening democracy was not without problems. Land grabbing and political instability remain the biggest threats to Ethiopia's development prospects. From this

viewpoint, the significance of this article lies in its empirical analysis of why impressive economic growth failed to provide political stability in the country, through a comparative study, based on interviews conducted in Ethiopia from March to May 2019.

The third reason for adopting the developmental state model in Ethiopia was due to the strong political determination of EPRDF to create single-party dominance under the pretext of development. Political leaders in dominant party regimes have different survival strategies, including creating a strong party that dominates the economy, controls areas of political competition and uses coercion to increase their chances of staying in power (Way 2005).

Between 1991 and 2018, the EPRDF was a *de facto* coalition controlled by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in which the political ideology of revolutionary democracy allowed the merging of the party and state to facilitate monopoly and domination. In fact, the 2005 contentious elections were a defining moment for the EPRDF to realise that it had lost democratic legitimacy. So, it quickly pushed towards developmentalism to enable the party to retain not only power, but also heavy hands on the economy (Vaughan 2011, 632). Hence, this article critically analyses attempts to reformulate Ethiopia's development approaches, making discourses of economic development and poverty eradication a central aspect of the EPRDF's claims of legitimacy, while setting aside democratic credentials that generate contradictions with the country's federal structure.

Considering the themes highlighted above, the topics in this paper are divided into five sections. The first section introduced the paper with its objectives. The second section discusses the emergence and conceptual understanding of Ethiopia's 'developmental state' model to see how Ethiopia does this. The next two sections, the third and fourth, respectively, presents an analysis of the practical application of the model to see how Ethiopia's development practice is similar or contradictory to the East Asian model through comparative evidence. The last section, the fifth, provides concluding remarks.

Understanding Ethiopia's 'developmental state'

There is an understanding that the concept of a developmental state consists of two main components that are important for its definition: ideological and structural. The ideological characteristics emphasise the developmental goals of the state to promote high rates of economic growth and sustainability, as this forms the basis of its legitimacy (Johnson 1999, 52). Beside setting this ideological feature, a developmental state must have institutional characteristics that Mkandawire refers to as the 'state-structure nexus' that enable one state to achieve growth and development (Mkandawire 2001). Taken these two components, a developmental state can be defined as one whose ideological underpinnings are developmental and one that establishes institutional structures to achieve the task of economic development. It also represents the concept of the state allowing a private market economy to operate where an interventionist state could govern the market, with the ability and commitment to address market failures (Nem Singh and Ovadia 2018).

From this perspective, determining whether Ethiopia has created a successful developmental state in practice is controversial, but it is argued that there are conceptual characteristics that Ethiopia shares with the East Asian model. The late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, the architect of the Ethiopia's 'developmental state', argued that his concept of a

‘developmental state’ is based on a prudent combination of market forces and government intervention: the government plays a leading role in providing basic infrastructure and services, as well as in creating an enabling environment for the development of manufacturing capacities (New African 2011).

EPRDF used the phrase ‘democratic developmental state’ to describe its model, arguing that a democratic orientation is as important as its development orientation. Theoretically, this runs counter to the classical Asian model often associated with authoritarianism. Zenawi often theoretically argued that the growth of democracy and development can occur in tandem as there is no inherent conflict between the two (Zenawi 2006). Referring to Zenawi’s argument, Alex De Waal explained that there is a convergence of theory and reality in Ethiopia’s ‘developmental state’, as development was primarily concerned with eradicating poverty, democratic legitimacy was seen as a *sine qua non* for ethnically diverse African societies (De Waal 2013, 154).

The crux of the matter was that development and democracy were presented as equally important and indispensable values and choices for Ethiopia’s survival as a country. Perhaps this suggests that top leaders were convinced that Ethiopia’s realities required a theoretically rigorous development strategy that embedded democratic ideals to eradicate poverty and overcome a deeply rooted autocratic culture. However, the practice brought a dynamic of its own, as their theory degenerated into a set of dogmas parroted by loyal party cadres who barely understood it (De Waal 2021). Its practical implementation runs counter to the constitutional pledges of multiparty democracy and federalism, effectively creating a ‘no-choice democracy’ under the guise of a developmental state in which the EPRDF and its affiliates contested to plunder the state.

Thus, in practice, authoritarianism is a characteristic that Ethiopia’s ‘developmental state’ shares with the East Asian model. Scholars arguably view the autocratic nature of the developmental state in East Asia as a factor contributing to impressive performance (Yeung 2014, 82). One explanation is that the state must ease itself from the procedural hurdles of democracy to deliver fast economic growth. The other explanation is that governments need to stay in power long enough to ensure continuity of policy. Contrasting his own theory of ‘democratic developmental state’, Meles Zenawi summarised the latter explanation as follows:

Developmental policy is unlikely to transform a poor country into a developed one within the time frame of the typical election cycle. There has to be continuity of policy if there is to be sustained and accelerated economic growth. In a democratic polity uncertainty about the continuity of policy is unavoidable. More damagingly for development, politicians will be unable to think beyond the next election. It is argued therefore that the developmental state will have to be undemocratic to stay in power long enough to carry out successful development. (Zenawi 2006)

In theory, Meles himself seemed to advocate a democratic developmental state as a viable project for an ethnically diverse continent of Africa. However, the praxis contrasts sharply with his theoretical conviction. The road towards a developmental state in the aftermath of the 2005 contentious election was accompanied by a regression of democracy and a reversion to a complete authoritarianism.

While Ethiopia was hailed by many for its remarkable economic growth (Hauge and Chang 2019), many condemned the EPRDF measures that weaken political opposition

and suffocating laws that successfully hamstrung the activities of civil societies and the free press. Allo (2017) argued that the EPRDF's 'development' strategy went together with widespread human rights violations, land grabbing under the guise of 'development projects', the suppression of dissent and closure of democratic spaces. As such, the road towards a developmental state was accompanied by a regression of democracy and a reversion to a complete authoritarianism.

In a nutshell, the experiment of the developmental state in Ethiopia has brought fast economic growth. On the flip side, it has caused discontent among the wider public, brewing social unrests because of the stifling political climate that the brutal execution of the developmental state unleashed. Mass protests that roiled the country, mainly Oromia region, from 2014 to 2018 are a case in point.

However, it is difficult to trace the exact timing of Ethiopia's adoption of the developmental state. In fact, there seems to be a difference in the political and economic discourse of the country, both in terms of time and its cause. Accordingly, three conflicting but also interrelated views explain the rationale behind Ethiopia's move to adopt the model. One view suggests that the desire to draw inspiration from East Asia's development success occurred through 'intellectual' channels studying the Albanian socialist revolution, the writings of Lenin and the industrial policy of South Korea starting from the final years of TPLF's armed struggle against the military regime (Weis 2016). This intellectual influence on EPRDF cannot be underestimated as early reforms undertaken by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (1991–1994)¹ did not fully comply with the traditional prescriptions of the Washington Consensus for economic liberalisation (Oqubay 2015).

The second view suggests that the promotion of the developmental state as a model began in the early 2000s, along with the international momentum created by the Millennium Development Goals and the widespread global response to the failure of neoliberalism in Africa. This paved ways to choose a developmental state as the model, depicting poverty as an existential threat to Ethiopia's survival (Gebregziabher 2019, 476). The third view, however, suggests that the reason for the adoption of the model in Ethiopia was the strong political determination of the ruling party to establish one-party domination under the guise of development, especially after the 2005 electoral crisis, realising that it had lost its political legitimacy (Vaughan 2011).

Despite these differing views on Ethiopia's adoption of the model, rooted in the tense relationship between the government and the opposition, it seems that a coherent development strategy only began to emerge in the early years of the new millennium. The government publicly announced it after the 2005 elections, making it the subject of intense debate in academic and political forums (Lefort 2012).

Thus, with this direct conceptual reference to the East Asian model, the next section analyzes the practical implementation of the 'developmental state' to see how Ethiopia does it, identifying parallels and revealing contradictions through comparative evidence.

Comparative parallels between Ethiopia's 'developmental state' and the East Asian model

One piece of evidence pointing to the parallels between the Ethiopia's 'developmental state' and the East Asian model is the ideological orientation of the regime's economic

policy towards industrialisation. The East Asian model is based on industrial growth, and manufacturing was the main feature of their development policies (Chang 2006). Oqubay (2018, 2) highlighted that the development of the manufacturing sector as the main driver of sustainable economic growth was the focus of the EPRDF in the post-2010 period. Hauge and Chang (2019) have argued that some East Asian countries have a direct influence towards the industrial orientations of Ethiopia's economic policy during the formulation of the Growth and Transformation plans through development assistance, with regular high-level consultations on industrial policy.

Accordingly, industrialisation was placed at the centre of Ethiopia's development strategies, as evidenced by the ambitious manufacturing sector growth targets in the second Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP-II) of 2015–2020, which had the highest growth rates of any sector of the economy.² These ambitious growth targets led to the assumption that Ethiopia is undergoing rapid industrialisation. The industrial policy, according to Hauge and Irfan (2016), included measures such as industrial skills and infrastructure development, expanding government lending to priority sectors, measures to promote exports and import substitution, and attract foreign capital and investment in industrial park development.

However, despite Ethiopia's consolidated industrial development strategy, policy outcomes were sluggish across key sectors. Pérez (2021, 115) collaborate this assertion, arguing that Ethiopia remains less industrialised than the average in sub-Saharan Africa, with a manufacturing value added at 5.5 per cent of GDP compared to 11.3 per cent for the region in 2019. More radically, critics have argued that industrialisation does not exist in Ethiopia, dismissively claiming that the Ethiopian government run a successful public relations campaign selling 'a story that doesn't really exist' (Johnson 1999).

A second parallel is that the EPRDF regime was in complete control of the economy. This is clearly demonstrated by its heavy hands in the market and the role of state-owned enterprises and party businesses in the economy. In the East Asian model, state ownership of the economy is evident not only in its intervention in the market, but also in the financial incentives and indirect subsidies provided to export-oriented foreign companies that source resources from local and engage in joint ventures with domestic firms (Irfan, Chang, and Hauge 2016). Likewise, the EPRDF regime provided financial incentives for foreign investors in manufacturing sector. These incentives include exemption from income tax for up to ten years, subsidised land leases, and exemptions from duties and taxes on imported raw materials and capital equipment (Hauge and Chang 2019).

However, Oqubay (2018, 14) argued that while industrial policy may have an unusual degree of coherence, its design and implementation showed many weaknesses: there was no adequate application of reciprocal controls to improve productivity and change industrial behaviour across sectors. This resulted in abuse of incentives with little control or discipline, which in turn made it difficult to achieve import substitution and export revenue targets. Moreover, attitudes toward foreign direct investment in Ethiopia are extremely slipshod. Little has been done to push foreign investors to source resources locally or to transfer technology to domestic firms.

Another flaw of this sector is that the manufacturing industry is highly dependent on foreign investors due to the small size of the domestic private sector. The domestic private sector in Ethiopia has grown significantly since the early 2000s in terms of

investment. But this growth has not yet led to penetration into the manufacturing sector and export market, which are considered critical to industrialisation and structural transformation (Gebregziabher 2019). It has led to an over-reliance on state-owned enterprises and party businesses as market actors (Chinigò 2020). This contrasts with the East Asian model, which emphasises the importance of an internationally competitive domestic private sector alongside state ownership in the economy.

Such strong government interference in the economy and reliance on state-owned parastatals and party businesses raise the question not only of how much space was actually exists for the domestic private sector. But it also led to popular disgust with the ethnic economy created by the regime, increasing the feeling that a segment of the population was receiving an economic benefit at the expense of others. One of the specific TPLF elite-based economic ventures that created public discontent was the Metals and Engineering Corporation (METEC), a corporate military wing established in 2010 as an agency to oversee the establishment of an industrial base for the economy (Weis 2016, 299).

On top, the party's loyalty took the driver's seat to replace merit, and this led to the booming of patronage networks, where people in and around government offices diverted state resources to their own pockets (Araia 2013, as cited in Hassan 2018, 386). As such, the military became a powerful economic actor and took part in ethnic patronage practices, as it was heavily influenced by Tigray military generals. A trade expert interviewed explains that some METEC generals used their military ranks to influence decisions and ensure the benefits of their networks in the competition for resources, completely controlling the signing of contracts for the implementation of megaprojects.³ For example, METEC acted as the main engineering contractor for the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), oversaw the construction of sugar and fertiliser plants and the assembly of wagons for the expanding national rail system (Belay, Fantini, and Gagliardone 2020).

However, these government megaprojects, for which METEC signed contracts, proved to be counterproductive, leading to rapid accumulation of debt and failing to deliver the promised jobs (Gebregziabher 2019). In short, the desire to transform the economy into an industrial powerhouse was hijacked by military generals who fell into ethnic patronage to create and redistribute wealth. This became one of the factors of grievance among the youths, who, since 2014, organised protests against the EPRDF regime.

Moreover, party business owned by the ruling EPRDF was another source of youth's economic grievance. The EPRDF run multi-billion-dollar party's conglomerates that operate in several sectors of the economy. The overall effect of these enterprises was the strangulation of private initiatives since the party businesses acted as a replacement for the private sectors and had access to all profitable enterprises before anyone else. This made it impossible to compete in the market for others as access to the most profitable sectors was blocked for private entrepreneurs, a trade expert recounted.⁴ The ability of politically affiliated companies to distort the market is too high, as they can freely win government bids, limiting competition and artificially inflating the cost of important materials and services.⁵ Given their involvement in all sectors, the economic strength of party businesses points to the dominant position of the EPRDF in the economy. This in effect corrupts the emerging democratic system by blurring the boundaries between the state and the party, rigging electoral votes and political financing. In short, the developmental state became the ideology and mechanism that legitimised

the capture of the state with the aim of establishing one-party sovereignty of the country's political economy.

A third parallel is that, like the East Asian countries, the EPRDF regime was highly critical of the neoliberal paradigm, and this has always remained the most important feature of the EPRDF ideology, constantly insisting on autonomy from the ideological demands of Western donors such as the World Bank and the IMF. It must also be noted that the emergence of the developmental state in Ethiopia was part of the widespread global response to the failure of neoliberalism in the developing world.

The speeches of former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in this regard represent the most important impacts as he emphasised the need for rapid economic growth to ensure Ethiopia's survival as a country. Zenawi argued that the liberal paradigm has come to a dead end as an alternative to African development, and the new-approach developmental state is the most viable alternative to advancing. He rejected the 'Washington Consensus' model, saying that it simply made developing countries adopt submissive attitudes toward developed countries, and therefore a strong state was needed to break a reliance on the western modernisation path (Zenawi 2006). Zenawi repeatedly stressed the failure of the neoliberal model, describing the last three decades as a lost decade for Africa, and thus presented Africa's commitment to the developmental state model as an alternative in his speech at the World Leaders Forum at Columbia University in 2010, indicating that this could be seen as Africa's second liberation.⁶

Zenawi vehemently rejected neoliberalism and evidently demonstrated the shortcomings of the paradigm in Africa. However, Ethiopia never maintained its autonomy from outside ideological influence, as this is often circumvented because of consistent attempts to emulate the development paths of various countries,⁷ even before the establishment of the Bretton Woods Institutions. Clapham (2006) argued that the policy of emulation in Ethiopia began in the mid-nineteenth century taking Imperial Russia as the first model of modernisation and development. This was followed by an attempt to copy the Meiji period from the Japanese Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The process was discontinued during the war with fascist Italy. After the Second World War, the British monarchy became a model for emulation. And the 1974 revolution brought the socialist military regime that staunchly followed the Soviet Union as a model. The overthrow of the socialist regime in 1991 due to armed struggle led to the adoption of a distinctive model of multinational federalism as an approach to the problem of ethnic diversity in Ethiopia. Over the past decade, Ethiopia has been attempting to emulate the development success of East Asian countries, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and China (Clapham 2006). Since 2018, the country seems to have turned to the West, marking a departure from the East Asian governing ideology previously adopted by the EPRDF, indicating that the search for a development model is still an ongoing process.

Hence, despite emulating ready-made models from time to time, Ethiopia's fundamental problems, such as poverty, instability, and authoritarianism, remained unresolved. Clapham (2006, 144) argued that Ethiopia tried to solve its long-standing political and economic problems by emulating models from other countries, but they all failed. This suggests that the transplantation of foreign models has either caused enormous damage to Ethiopian development or done little to change the reality of the country's problems (Levine 2013). Thus, an obstacle to sustainable development in Ethiopia is

that the country suffers from uncritical emulation of ideas and concepts created in a different cultural environment, copied, and pasted in Ethiopia. The viable solution to the myriad problems facing the country is not just moving from one ready-made panacea to another, but in establishing Ethiopian development on Ethiopian foundations, formulating views and ideas that are compatible with Ethiopia's needs and realities, with sufficient attention to local conditions.

Comparative contradictions between Ethiopia's 'developmental state' and the East Asian model

The analysis in this section notes that Ethiopia's development model differs from that of East Asia in terms of lack of bureaucratic autonomy, fragmented public support for development projects, incompatibility of the model with the country's federal structure, and land-grabbing problems.

Lack of bureaucratic autonomy

One view of the developmental state is that the state should play an active role in promoting economic development, which requires a professional bureaucracy as this is the operational arm of the government. Evans (2012) coined the term embedded autonomy to describe a core feature of developmental bureaucracy. Such a bureaucracy is not only able to protect itself from particularistic private sector interests, but also productively cooperate with it, sharing the goal of industrial transformation. Such a bureaucracy also effectively insulate itself from unproductive political interference (Pempel 1999).

However, evidence suggests that the transition to a developmental state model of public administration in Ethiopia has more deprived bureaucrats of their 'autonomy'. This sharply contradicts the core tenet of a professional and depoliticised civil service system (Gebresenbet and Kamski 2019). Even though Ethiopia's bureaucracy has grown, its independence is dwarfed by the authoritarian practice of politicians who often portray their intervention in these institutions as a justification to compensate for bureaucratic deficiencies using the organisational strength and power of the EPRDF (Oqubay 2015, 76). Critics argued that the bureaucracy has never been neutral in its service to the public and has remained a demonstration of a deviation from established norms as loyalties to the political executive became the only criterion for individuals to get employment and be promoted in the hierarchy of public office (Mengistu and Vogel 2006). As such, the already weak civil service systems in Ethiopia were ill-equipped to fulfil the required developmental roles. They were manipulated by ruling elites who used public administration as a source of patronage and a basis to build their networks or punish their opponents. This suggests that the Ethiopian model is radically different from the East Asian one, as the ruling party expands its political control over the bureaucracy.

Fragmented public support

Another distinctive feature of the classical developmental state model is its elitist nature, which at the same time enjoys broad support. According to Leftwich, the model is built

around ‘developmental elites’ who comprise small groups of senior politicians and bureaucrats with critical roles and authority in the making of developmental policy, working closely with the top executive figure, and mobilising popular support to development projects (Leftwich 1995, 405). However, although the EPRDF tried to emulate the model in which a few elites assigned at the centre are tasked with making key decisions, this lacked broad coalition commitment to achieve the desired development goals. There was no clear consensus among the governing elites of the four constituents of the EPRDF, both administrative and political, over the size and direction of development.

In the case of the East Asian developmental states, the political elites were able to win the trust and cooperation of the bureaucrats as well as the private sector to create functional state institutions that facilitated both political stability and economic development (Huff, Dewit, and Oughton 2001). However, the lack of broad coalition commitment among the administrative and political elite in Ethiopia was reflected in its inability to mobilise concerted public support even for high-profile development projects. A good example of this is fragile public support for domestic funding, especially in the early stages, for the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, the largest infrastructure project ever undertaken by the Ethiopian government. The dam is financed almost exclusively from domestic sources, as outside sources refuse to fund it due to hydro-political sensitivity with Egypt. But this was only achieved because the government forced public sector workers and other employees to contribute their monthly salaries to the project as a civic duty.

There were also attempts and the need to pursue legitimacy through economic achievements, given the fact that the EPRDF/TPLF’s rise to power in the early 1990s was the result of an armed struggle that did not translate into the entitlement to rule the country. While EPRDF in this regard viewed itself as reflecting aspects of the East Asian model, whose legitimacy stems from economic performance rather than how it came to power, but practice evidently shows that it has failed to achieve such legitimacy for the following reasons.

One of the reasons is that state-society relations in this model are narrowly constructed around political elites, while the broader citizenry is kept at the periphery of this relationship. In this regard, it is captivating to observe the convergence of the elitist approach of the model with the party’s ‘revolutionary democracy’ doctrine. This doctrine is grounded on the conviction that ‘the enlightened elites should lead the unconscious masses to a social transformation’. The EPRDF’s venture to marry the developmental state model with the notion of ‘revolutionary democracy’ can be captured from the party’s document stating that: the mass is ‘backward, uneducated, and unorganised’ and hence would easily fall into ‘the nets of rent seekers’ (Quotes from internal EPRDF document, as cited in Lefort 2013, 461). Based on this premise, the logical conclusion is that the masses should be ‘mobilised, organised and coordinated’ by the ‘omniscient’ vanguard political leaders towards the desired goal, which allowed the ruling elite to assume the role of interpreting the needs and aspirations of society (Weis 2016).

Accordingly, the elitist vanguard system expounds a vision that neither connects the state and society nor builds institutional channels and regulatory frameworks for public participation. In the absence of strong state-society relations, the political leaders could not forge mutuality with the people they govern, inevitably leading to misunderstanding

and tension. Public policies and projects, which are supposed to be the outcomes of negotiation between the state and society, merely reflect the needs and priorities of the people as speciously understood and framed by the elites. The conflicting narratives of the Addis Ababa Master Plan that set off the 2014–2018 public protests is an important example in this respect.

Thus, the inability to deliver growth with equity was another reason for the EPRDF's failure to achieve growth-driven legitimacy. This caused frustration over economic growth that was not trickling down to youth. Young people were increasingly feeling left out of key economic decisions that would affect their future. These feelings spread all over the country among disaffected youth in many regions who could not get jobs even after receiving their first and second degrees. But EPRDF official view this statement differently: one government official claimed that youth frustration was the result of the very success that the EPRDF unleashed because of progressive economic policies, making the party the victim of its own successes. He explained that the economic success of the EPRDF raised high expectations among the youth who have been skilfully manipulated by the rent-seeking elite in Oromia and Amhara, fuelling resentment against the TPLF for control of the party and state.⁸

Mosley (2016) also noted that the government has raised expectations of economic development to unrealistic levels, which caused frustration and anger, especially among young people. This anger is compounded by the widespread perception that the economy, security, and politics were dominated by ethnic Tigrayans, whose TPLF make up the core of the EPRDF. According to a veteran politician, the economic growth has not improved public life, but it has helped to attract billions of dollars of foreign investment that has been used to benefit politicians and oligarchs with ties to the ruling party.⁹ Hence, the anger at not benefiting from economic growth was a factor behind the youth grievances, as their question linked to the morbid government economic model that left them to live in poverty. This also explains the inability to deliver legitimacy stemming from economic performance.

In fact, what was largely missing from the Ethiopia's development narrative was that the EPRDF's 'development' strategy went together with widespread human rights violations, land grabbing under the guise of 'development projects', the suppression of dissent and closure of democratic spaces (Allo 2017). This contributed significantly to the country's political crisis, as the regime ramped up its efforts to achieve 'performance legitimacy', labelling its critics as anti-development and anti-peace (Hagmann and Abbink 2011, 585).

As a result, the country remained in a difficult situation, and, in fact, the last four years leading up to the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as prime minister in April 2018 were marked by strong public protests. This revealed the fragility of the social contract that has governed Ethiopia's political life since 1991, demonstrating the EPRDF's inability to achieve growth-driven legitimacy. The rise to power of Abiy Ahmed signalled a departure from the East Asian emulated governing ideology previously adopted by the EPRDF. This is evidently reflected in Abiy's Home-grown Economic Reform Programme, which requires the economy to transition from public sector-led to that driven by the private-sector economy aimed at putting the nail in the coffin of the developmental state.¹⁰

Contradiction of the model with the federal structure

As noted, Ethiopia's development model is based on the experience of East Asian countries, whose populations are largely homogeneous. There are, however, peculiar national conditions in Ethiopia that affect its implementation in the context of the federal system that was adopted in 1991 as an antidote to the pervasive historical mismanagement of the country's diversity. The old centralised system of government was forced into federal restructuring, which decentralised power to regional states. The paradoxical models adopted by the regime, such as multinational federalism, which decentralised authority for regional states, and the subsequent adoption of the developmental state, which advocates centralisation as the right path to rapid growth, remain the most important pillar of the country's political and economic restructuring.

Ethiopia's efforts to achieve a developmental state in the context of a multinational federal government system not only deviate from the prevailing model in East Asia but are also inherently incompatible due to the competing approaches that define the two systems, one interviewee recounted.¹¹ She further noted that the centralised and top-down approach in decision-making is further entrenched by the party's long-held ideological principle of 'democratic centralism'.

The ideology of democratic centralism tries to combine 'democracy with strict hierarchical methods of execution of party decisions' where free discussion within the top leadership of the party is the primary means of consensus building and decision-making (Waller 1981, 89). All other cadres and state machinery remain subservient to the decisions made at the centre. For example, EPRDF decision-making was largely in the hands of the TPLF, and the TPLF's modus operandi was to hold a lengthy internal debate – completely inscrutable to outsiders – and then present its decision to the EPRDF's executive committee. The 36 executive members, which make up the central decision-making body of EPRDF endorse the 'correct' party line that was not up for debate. This reduced the norm of plural democracy to bounded debate, with key decisions were made by a small political establishment behind closed doors and then handed over to rank-and-file party members at all levels of government for strict implementation, diminishing the role of other citizens to the status of consumers who had no right to ask questions (De Waal 2021).

Consequently, regional and local governments are virtually hamstrung by the centralised and top-down approach of the party and remain subordinated to the central authorities. The relapse of a centralised state structure has intensified the hitherto ethnic marginalisation and economic exploitation. Hence, it appears that the highly decentralised government structures involved in devolution of authority to regions are in sharp contrast with centralised administrative practices that characterise Ethiopia's 'developmental states'. The practice caused grievances among the population, eroding the values and positive strides that the multinational federal arrangement aspires to achieve.

Moreover, the last decade has witnessed the growing intervention of the federal executive on matters regarded as inherently regional and even local. A case in point is the large-scale land deals for foreign and domestic investors. Empirical studies suggest that the central government allocated large tracts of land to foreign investors under the guise of facilitating investment, in clear disregard of the constitutionally guaranteed autonomy of regional states (Mittal and Mousseau 2011). The blatant encroachment on the regional

jurisdiction and the allocation of huge tracts of land without adequate consultation with regional, local government and communities engendered disenfranchisement and agitation. An academic interviewed explained that land-grabbing problems were one of the main rallying issues for the protesters in Oromia, as evidenced from the placards of the protesters: 'Oromia is not for sale', 'Stop the land grab!'¹² Violence and attacks against foreign farm companies were witnessed in Oromia and Gambella regions, where large tracts of land were allocated at low prices. Protesters tried to justify the attacks by suggesting that these firms are accumulating wealth backed by the central government at the expense of the local community.

Land grabbing problems

Therefore, one way to explain the paradox between the impressive economic performance and the recent political turmoil in the country is as the clash of two issues: development and land grabbing. Land grabbing problems are the main and direct sources of youth's grievance, which also explains why the impressive economic growth could not ensure political stability in the country. According to Ethiopia's constitution, land is the common property of the State and the nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia (FDRE Constitution 1995). This policy is built up on the 1975 land reform decree, when, as a strategy for post-war economic recovery, EPRDF viewed increasing productivity in small-scale farming as the key to its policy that agriculture should drive economic development, believing that this would eventually lead to industrialisation.

However, even though the policy stipulates that smallholder farming is the centre of Ethiopia's development model, over time, the government's policy focus has shifted to large-scale commercial agriculture. This has created landlessness by evicting smallholders from their land, which was contrary to the March 1975 land reform decree that abolished the Imperial landed class. In short, in Ethiopia's recent history and certainly throughout its past, land has not been the property of the farmers. This means that the land issue has remained virtually unchanged, as farmers have been denied free access to land. This not only makes the land issue intact under the condition of development, but also keeps the farmers in conditions of dependence on the government.

As heard from the slogan of demonstrators during the 2014–2018 protests in Oromia, the current situation can be best explained as a change from 'Land to the Tiller', a slogan used during the Ethiopian student movement of 1970s, to 'Land of the Investor' (Abbink 2011; Rahmato 2011) as individual farmers are not part of the process of decision making and have been evicted in the name of development policy. Hence, at the centre of youth's land grabbing grievances was a government project, commonly known as the Addis Ababa Master Plan, to expand Addis Ababa to the surrounding areas of the Oromia region. It was an attempt by the government to seize land from the Oromo farmers against their will and without proper compensation.

The Addis Ababa Master Plan first introduced to OPDO cadres in Adama in early 2014 by the TPLF officials. However, unlike the previous practice of toadying the official TPLF line, opposition to the Master Plan was initially provoked by the OPDO's nationalists and was aired on regional television after the workshop.¹³ And this was followed by the slogan 'No to the Addis Ababa Master plan', chanted by Oromo youth. This triggered protests in April 2014, which were suppressed before the

May 2015 elections, but later resumed in the town of Ginchi in November 2015, becoming a mass protest that swept the entire region and spread to other regions of the country. The protests created a general atmosphere of ungovernability that eventually led to the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn on February 15, 2018, facilitating the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister on April 2, 2018.

Activists often use words and phrases such as ‘land grabbing’, ‘confiscation’ and ‘annexation’ to describe the Addis Ababa Master Plan and its intended consequences. According to one opposition politician, it was a land grabbing scheme disguised as a development plan and a plan for political control of Addis Ababa along with its resources by EPRDF leaders.¹⁴ An academic also explained that for the Oromo people, the master plan was a plan for annexation.¹⁵

Government officials initially denied that the master plan was aimed at expanding Addis Ababa into Oromia, presenting it as a mutually beneficial project for both Addis Ababa and Oromia. They presented it as a development plan aimed at creating an infrastructure that connects Addis Ababa with the surrounding region of Oromia to promote mutual benefits in trade and investment. However, in January 2016, the government was forced to cancel it, acknowledging that the plan was the main reason for the Oromo protests.

The protesters from the very beginning feared that the master plan would evict farmers without alternative livelihoods. They consider that its intention was to divert resources from Oromo farmers to investors affiliated to the ruling party to use it for everything from industrial development to luxury housing. One athlete explained that in the past, the government evicted farmers who were her relatives from their land for sale to foreign investors without compensation,¹⁶ while a veteran politician claims that the master plan was thought to rob Oromo farmers of their rights and land.¹⁷ ‘Land is everything, and loss of land is loss of everything else’, said one farmer who lost his land without compensation for *labuu* condominium development on the outskirts of Addis Ababa.¹⁸

Overall, the Addis Ababa Master Plan came under the pretext of development. The flashpoint that ignited public protests across Ethiopia’s vast Oromia state was the displacement caused by the rapid expansion of Addis Ababa, at the expense of adjacent Oromo towns and farmland. It led to a series of protests because farmers on the outskirts of Addis Ababa were already suffering a large number of real estate expansions. This quickly spurred Oromos in the country and abroad under the slogan: ‘*Lafti Kenya – Lafe Kenya*’, which literally means ‘Our land is our bone’. It became a rallying point throughout Oromia and abroad in the diaspora.

The Master Plan case is a microcosm of pervasive serious flaws in the design and preparation of development projects in Ethiopia. Resistance and distrust of the project was mainly the result of a top-down approach, a secretive planning process and a lack of public consultation and participation regarding the benefits, impacts and consequences of its implementation. This top-down approach, where policies or projects are rarely the result of consultation and negotiation with the general public in general or with interested and affected communities in particular, is pervasive throughout the country. For example, until recently, in the name of development, local communities were forcefully evicted from their lands to clear land for sugarcane and cotton plantations in several parts of the country, especially in the southern Omo valley and the Gambella region. In a

nutshell, anti-government protests that threaten the country's political stability were strong evidence that Ethiopia's development paradigm represents local manifestations of long-standing grievances among the population with the country's political and economic trajectory.

Several factors led to the development of flawed expropriation policies and facilitated the massive land grabs in the present Ethiopia. The first factor was the securitisation of development after the 2005 contentious elections, which contributed to the flawed relationship between economic growth, land grabbing and political instability in Ethiopia. Because the EPRDF saw poverty as an existential threat to Ethiopia's survival, it often tried to rationalise its desire to aggressively extract and mobilise resources and consolidate power in violation of basic conventions to counter the alleged existential threat: poverty (Gebresenbet 2014). In this regard, the 2016 Oakland Institute report showed how government drafted the anti-terrorism law and used it as a tool of repression to deter resistance against forced evictions and massive land grabs by domestic and foreign investors that violated basic human rights (Gordon et al. 2015). Building on extensive previous legal analysis and works on land issues in Ethiopia, the Oakland Institute report documented how the law was designed and used as a repressive tool by the government to silence its critics and to stifle and intimidate political speech and freedom. The report further noted that the law not only criminalised basic human rights, especially freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, by defining terrorism on a very broad and vague scale, giving the government enormous leeway to punish words and actions that are perfectly legal in a democracy. It also gave the police and security services unprecedented powers: it shifted the burden of proof onto the accused, with confessions obtained under torture were used against them in court (Gordon et al. 2015).

The other factor is the development and implementation of land policies based on partisan politics and authoritarian practices. The state ownership of land gives the ruling party excessive powers to control the land users. While the government defends the ownership of land for the protection of tenure security and social justice, the practice has been criticised for violating protection against arbitrary expropriation (Ambaye 2015).

Moreover, the Constitution separates the legislative and administrative aspects of the use of land and natural resources between federal government and regional states.¹⁹ However, in contrast to the constitutional provision, there has been a substantial move to extend the mandate of the federal government to include the power to manage and implement land policy that falls within the jurisdiction of the regions: the regional states were forced to delegate their land administration mandate to the federal government (Tura 2017, 98). The land is thus leased centrally to commercial agricultural investors. But the Constitution only provides for the delegation of powers from the federal government to regional states downward, not upward.²⁰ These measures have had disastrous consequences for local communities, resulting in the forcible eviction of tens of thousands of farmers from fertile land to free up for investors. Despite the rhetoric that land is the common property of Ethiopia's nations, their role in governance remains marginal, and all rights linked to land became disposable for the sake of development.

However, following the changes that took place in 2018, the balance of power between the regions and the centre changed, so the regional investment bureaus became more influential in the decision-making process, especially regarding the administration of

land that they had previously forced to delegate to the federal government by returning unused land to the state land bank. More recently, the decision that previously forced states to delegate their land administration mandate to the federal government is reversed with the belief that a more balanced distribution of investments could also help defuse political tensions.

Conclusion

This article notes that the East Asian model has a strong ideological impact on the EPRDF regime, allowing it to formulate a strong vision of development. While such an impact contributed to economic growth, it did not deliver democracy or stability to the country. One of the main factors of instability in Ethiopia is the morbid development projects that have resulted in large-scale land grabs and colossal public investment failures. Moreover, Ethiopia's attempts to achieve a developmental state in the context of a multinational federal system of government deviated from the prevailing centralist model in East Asian models. This sparked popular discontent, leading to political instability and social unrest. So that it was difficult to replicate East Asian development model in Ethiopia: conditions that allowed the creation of a successful developmental state in Asian countries do not exist in the Ethiopian context, especially in the absence of broad support for development projects, a competent, autonomous, and capable bureaucracy. An ineffective framework for managing the private sector's contribution to the economy and widespread rent-seeking behaviour among ruling elites is another problem that makes it difficult to replicate the success achieved in East Asia.

Notes

1. EPRDF consistently rejected demands for financial sector liberalization on the grounds that it would only allow foreign banks to operate in Ethiopia when local banks develop the financial, management and technological capabilities to compete with them.
2. GTP-II sets a growth target of 21.4 per cent for the industrial sector, 14.9 per cent for agriculture and 12.8 per cent for the services sector per year in a five-year period.
3. Interviewee Nr. 41 (a), Trade negotiator, March 14, 2019, Addis Ababa.
4. Interviewee Nr. 29 (a), Trade expert, May 14, 2019, Addis Ababa
5. Interviewee Nr. 31 (a), Trade expert, May 14, 2019, Addis Ababa
6. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWoEPK9njWY>; Speech of Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi at Columbia University's World Leaders Forum
7. See Clapham (2006) for a more detailed analysis of Ethiopia's emulation policies that began in the mid-nineteenth century and continue to the present.
8. Interviewee Nr. 11, Politician, March 25, 2019, Mekelle, Tigray region.
9. Interviewee Nr. 34, Politician, March 6, 2019, Addis Ababa.
10. See for example, International Monetary Fund (IMF), 'Six Things to Know about Ethiopia's New Program', December 23, 2019. Retrieved from IMF Ethiopia Country Focus: <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2019/12/23/na122319-six-things-to-know-about-ethiopia-new-program>
11. Interviewee Nr. 17, Academic, May 1, 2019, Addis Ababa.
12. Interviewee Nr. 44, Academic, April 24, 2019, Jimma.
13. See Addis Ababa-Finfinnee surrounding master plan faces fierce opposition from Oromos; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrWs8yJh5mY>
14. Interviewee Nr. 33, Politician, March 4, 2019, Addis Ababa.

15. Interviewee Nr. 36, Academic, February 21, 2019, Skype.
16. Interviewee Nr. 37, Athlete, March 7, 2019, Addis Ababa.
17. Interviewee Nr. 33, Politician, March 4, 2019, Addis Ababa.
18. Interviewee Nr. 27, Farmer, April 27, 2019, Ambo.
19. For example, the constitution states that the establishment of policies for the use and conservation of land and other natural resources is a mandate of the federal government (article 55 [2.a]), whereas the mandates to implement these policies are granted to the states (article 52 [d]).
20. For example, Article 50 (9) of the constitution states that the Federal Government may, when necessary, delegate to the States powers and functions granted to it by Article 51 of this Constitution (FDRE Constitution 1995).

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