

Socio-Economic and Political Analysis of a Fragile State: A Reflection on Ethiopia

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A review of the literature indicates that, currently, Ethiopia is now beyond the bounds of fragility. The purpose of the study was to investigate whether Ethiopia was experiencing fragility. After a review of the literature on fragility, a theoretical framework lens on fragility was developed to empirically test Ethiopia's current condition. A longitudinal analysis indicates that before 2018, Ethiopia was regarded as the central economic engine of sub-Saharan Africa. However, as the current regime reversed Ethiopia's developmental state model and moved to follow a neo-liberal model, Ethiopia's economy has gradually diminished. More specifically, during the current regime, Ethiopia has experienced a decline in its Gross Domestic Product, faced rampant unemployment, and encountered an increase in inflation. Its foreign exchange currency reserves have declined below the three-month threshold of hard currency required for a country to import goods and services, and its external debt has extended beyond the country's GDP. By encouraging armed conflict and widespread insurgencies, the current regime has caused social tension and deep humanitarian crises in Ethiopia—resulting in devastation of health and school facilities and causing more than five million Ethiopians to be displaced. Finally, failing to provide leadership to his people, the current regime in Ethiopia has willingly allowed the incursion of Ethiopia's sovereignty by foreign forces. The conclusion of the study is that, when observed through the lens of fragility using a longitudinal framework, currently, Ethiopia has traversed beyond fragility and seems to be heading toward balkanization.

Keywords: fragility, developmental state, neo-liberal model, legitimacy, sovereignty

Introduction

Against Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Abiy (hereafter referred to as Abiy), who unilaterally postponed Ethiopia's election in August 2020 by using the COVID-19 pandemic as justification (Felbab-Brown, 2022), the administrative region of Tigray defiantly held its own regional election on September 9, 2020.

To retaliate against the election conducted by the administrative region of Tigray, Abiy mobilized the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), ganged up with the Amhara militia, and *fano* mass murderers. Most significantly, Abiy compromised Ethiopia's sovereignty by allying with the Eritrean and Somalia external armed forces and using armed drones purchased from the United Arab Emirates to wage mass destruction on the Tigrayan civilian population and wipe them out.

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Being trained by Abiy to view the Tigrayans as life-threatening cancer that needs to be rooted out, Abiy's forces perpetrated severe human rights abuses of genocidal war on the administrative region of Tigray. More specifically, Abiy's invading forces sieged the administrative region of Tigray, strangled the Tigrayan population's access to water, food, medicine, banking, and other basic social services, burned Tigrayan farmlands, killed their animals, and looted valuable items from their residences, hospitals, and educational institutions.

Furthering their brutal acts, the Amhara militias and Eritrean forces raped Tigrayan nuns and underage girls and vanquished Tigray's historically noted monasteries and Muslim cultural heritage sites. Consequently, they rooted out more than 60,000 Tigrayans to flee to Sudan and stranded over 2 million displaced persons (Berkeley Forum, July 19, 2021; Nunis, 2021).

Branching out to Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, and the other Ethiopian administrative regions, Abiy's forces continued with his agenda of cleansing the country of Tigrayans. Without due process of law, many Tigrayans were incarcerated in devastating remote prison camps and several Tigrayans were burned alive.

Abiy's ethnic cleansing venture never stopped harassing and butchering Tigrayans. His forces were instructed to branch out and crack down on other innocent Ethiopians living in the areas of Oromia, Ogden, Afar, Benishangul, Gambelia, Walyata, Sidamo, Kemant, and Agew (Roble, 2021). Undermining the respect for diversity as stated in the Ethiopian constitution and paying no attention to healing and reconciliation, Abiy's government triggered conflict between the Ethiopian Christians and Muslims who have harmoniously coexisted for centuries.

In a nutshell, since Abiy came to power in Ethiopia in April 2018, the war against Tigray, the various civil wars, and the recent eruption of religious wars have precipitated a huge human cost, resulting in thousands being killed and millions of displaced persons being in desperate need of assistance (Nunis, 2021). Given the ongoing massive atrocities and the terror initiated by Abiy, Roble (2021) argues that Ethiopia is tilting toward becoming a failing state.

The aim of the study is to review the literature on fragility and empirically analyze Ethiopia's condition through the lens of the fragility framework. The study is structured into five sections. Section 1, this section, is the introduction. Section 2 presents a review of the literature on fragility. Section 3 highlights the theoretical framework of the study. Section 4 presents the results of the empirical analysis of the data source. The last section outlines the main findings of the study and charts policy implications.

Review of the Literature

Since 1990, the debate about failing or fragile states has flourished. The concept of fragility has attracted significant western government agencies, international organizations, independent policy analysts, academics, and foreign policy interests to develop its theoretical underpinning. Messner (2018) argues that fragility ultimately affects every country, one way or another, and depends on the ability of each state to withstand shocks and respond effectively. Being a "catchall term" that refers to miscellaneous factors means there is a lack of consensus on the operational definition of a fragile state (John, 2010).

International organizations have focused on the fragility of the state "...as a major international policy challenge in the fields of security, peacekeeping, poverty reduction, and humanitarian and development assistance" (Nay, 2013). For example, according to the African Development Bank (ADB), a fragile state arises due to conflicts; the erosion of effective governance, security, and institutional capacities; and economic and social disruption (FSDR/DEVINVEST, 2016).

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) highlights that fragile states impair their economic and social performance due to having weak governance, limited administrative capacity, and chronic humanitarian crises, which spill over and negatively affect the economic growth of their neighboring countries (FSDR/DEVINVEST, 2016).

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), on the other hand, identifies a fragile state to be characterized by violence, injustice, the challenge in economic foundations, and resilience as the major drivers of state fragility (FSDR/DEVINVEST, 2016).

Since September 11, 2001, commonly known as 9/11, US foreign policy analysts have characterized failed states as “...places where terrorist organizations and international criminal networks can flourish” (John, 2010). Focusing on intervention policy, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) uses the term fragile states in a continuum—ranging from “*failed*” to “*failing*” to “*recovering*” states. Based on this, USAID operationally defines failing states as those with the growing inability or willingness to assure provisions of even basic services and security to their citizens (see John, 2010).

The Fund for Peace (FFP), an independent, non-profit research and educational organization categorizes fragile states into the lack of social, political, and economic categories. Social indicators of a fragile state include demographic pressure, movements of refugees or internally displaced persons, unrest, and sustained human flights. The political and military indicators include the lack of legitimacy of the state and security apparatus and the intervention of external actors. The economic indicators encompass the dynamic relationship between macroeconomic performance and its impact on poverty (Fund for Peace, 2021).

Utilizing “Harmonized List of Fragile Situations”, the World Bank stringently characterizes state fragility as a process that includes the lack of four clusters: (1) economic management, (2) structural policies, (3) policies for social inclusion and equity, and (4) public sector management and institutions (FSDR/DEVINVEST, 2016).

Using a slightly less offensive term—fragile state rather than failed state (Nay, 2013)—academics, western government agencies, and international organizations depict fragile states to be confronted with war, violence, and extreme poverty. From an academic perspective, Nay (2013) argues that a fragile state encounters an alarming proliferation of civil conflicts that could result in the fragmentation of state institutions, economic recession, and deterioration of security conditions. Torres and Anderson (2004) assert that states which fail to meet minimal standards for their citizens could be labeled as fragile or poorly performing states, whereas states that are extreme cases could be labeled as “failed or collapsed states”. Helman and Rater (1993) argue that when law and order fall apart, fragile states not only imperil their citizens by not fulfilling basic needs but also threaten their neighbors with a flow of refugees. Contrasting on a continuum of weak, fragile, and failed, or underperforming, states, Rotberg (2003) argues that fragile states gradually fail to deliver political goods—security, education, health, economic opportunity, and infrastructure maintenance. Weisnstein and Vanishnav (2006) argue that fragile states, or poorly performing states, revolve around a combustible mix of a nation’s capacity and the lack of means to maintain political stability, maintain internal security, meet basic human needs, and give economic opportunity to its citizens.

In the same vein, Ziaja, Gravingholt, and Kreibaum (2019) argue that a fragile state could be identified by its state authority, capacity, and legitimacy. Authority refers to the ability of the state to control the use of physical violence within its territory. Capacity referees the ability of the state to provide basic public services to its citizens. State legitimacy, on the other hand, refers to the state’s ability to obtain the consent of its citizens to rule. Ziaja

et al. (2019) attempt to measure state legitimacy by using the following indicators—freedom of the press, freedom from prosecution, the number of human flights, and the number of personally displaced individuals.

To summarize the dimensions of a fragile state, some assessors have focused on the prevalence of security conditions and factional conflicts in unstable countries. Others emphasize the failure of economic, political, and social factors of a country to meet the basic services and security of its citizens. Below is given the conceptual framework needed to assess Ethiopia's state of fragility.

Research Framework

Various analysts have made considerable inroads toward the development of a formalized concept of a fragile state. However, the lack of existence of an agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a fragile state has inevitably led to polarized interpretations of the term (Mechling, 2014). Bearing in mind the contrasting ways in which the term fragile state has been conceptualized, this study assumes that the main causal determinant factors of a fragile state would be addressed in terms of macroeconomic, social, and political fragile state factors that each nation faces (The Fund for Peace, 2018).

The macroeconomic indicators that are used to analyze a fragile state include real GDP, inflation, unemployment rate, external debt, and foreign exchange reserves. The social factors that are used to map out the tendency of a state towards fragility include the value of the human development index: life expectancy, years of schooling, and gross national income. Finally, the pertinent political variables that identify a state's condition of fragility are the legitimacy of the regime in power, the intervention of external actors, the massive movement of refugees, and the status of internally displaced persons.

Macroeconomic Factors

In general, the economic health of a nation can be gauged over time using: (1) changes in real GDP (growth or decline in the monetary value of goods and services produced by the economy over time), (2) the unemployment rate (the percentage of the labor force actively seeking work), and (3) price stability (the volatility of the average of price of goods and services).

As is shown in Table 1, from 2010-2016 Ethiopia's GDP grew at 9.9% per year because it used state developmental capitalism which focused on prioritizing infrastructure and human resources. Overall investment in infrastructure, building redevelopment, tele-density improvement, airport construction, and foreign direct investment contributed to Ethiopia's economic growth. In short, prior to 2018, since Ethiopia's Developmental State Model had created one of the world's fastest-growing economies, it was known as the central economic engine of sub-Saharan Africa (Desta, 2019).

However, Ethiopia's real GDP declined from 8.36% in 2019 to 6.06% in 2020 and 5.64% in 2021 because of a substantial increase in Broad Money (M2), the impact of the COVID-19 health crisis, and a considerable increase in inflation (International Monetary Fund, 2021). In addition, due to mismanagement and massive political unrest and turbulence, Ethiopia has experienced a dramatic increase in cyclical unemployment ranging from 19% in 2018 to 21.6% in 2021. In particular, "youth unemployment has remained high at an official rate of 25%, although experts have calculated higher figures" (BTI, 2022, <https://www.bti-project.org>).

Stated differently, starting in 2020, slowing economic growth, persistently high inflation, high unemployment (stagflation), and the stagnant demand in the country's economy threaten to reverse years of progress that the poorest and most vulnerable Ethiopians enjoyed during the EPRDF era (OCHA Services, 2022).

In addition, despite the intention of Abiy's government "...to open a number of sectors to foreign investment through the partial privatization of state-owned enterprises that monopolize certain industries, including aerospace, logistics, telecommunications, and sugar production" (BTI, 2022, www.bti-project.org) to increase value-added exports, Ethiopia's net FDI inflows (% of GDP) declined. More particularly, greenfield investments—where the parent company starts a new venture in Ethiopia have declined from 32 in 2019 to 7 units in 2021. Consequently, Ethiopia's exports and imports fluctuated considerably from 2018 to 2021.

Similarly, starting in 2018, Ethiopia's external debt as a percentage of GDP has relatively increased due to stagnant world coffee prices, decreasing demand for agricultural and manufactured goods, mismanagement of borrowed funds, and the deterioration of Ethiopia's terms of trade. Thereby, the foreign exchange currency reserves of Ethiopia have declined below the three months threshold of hard currency required for a country to import goods and services (see Table 1). Consequently, a gradual decline in the GDP, an increase in poverty, sustained inflation, aggravated unemployment, and puffed-up external debt gravitates Ethiopia of today to flounder in an inevitable economic demise.

Table 1

Ethiopia's Real GDP Growth, Inflation Rate, Unemployment Rate, Government Debt (%GDP), Broad Money (%GDP), External Debt (%GDP), and Reserves

	2010-2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Real GDP growth (%)	9.9	10.2	6.82	8.36	6.06	5.64
Inflation (%)	11.5	10.68	13.83	15.84	20.46	28.57
Unemployment (%)	17.03	16.9	19.10	16.9	19.1	21.60
GOV. debt (%GDP)	47.5	57.7	61.1	57.6	56.1	58.5
Broad money (%GDP)	27.5	31.3	33.7	32.9	31.0	31.3
External debt (%GDP)	22.9	29.1	30.8	28.5	29.2	32.7
Foreign direct investment (%GDP)	2.77	4.9	4.0	2.7	2.2	
Number of greenfield investments				32	11	7
Export growth (%)		7.7	11.8	17.7	-0.5	
Import growth (%)		-7.5	2.2	18.5	15.6	
Reserves (months of imports)	2.0	2.0	1.7	2.2	2.1	2.7

Source: International Monetary Fund, "Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa." 2020 October. The World Bank, World Development Indicators (2021).

Social Services

A state can be described as fragile when the government fails to perform the delivery of life-sustaining core services to the poor, such as health care, education, and water (OECD, 2007). When assessed, using the Human Development Index (HDI) indicators—(1) the average life expectancy (life longevity and health); (2) education (access to schooling), and (3) income (standard of living), Ethiopia's performance on HDI is below 0.49. This puts Ethiopia in the low human development category, positioning it at 173 out of 189 countries and territories (UNDP, 2020).

Access to universal primary education, health coverage, and potable water increased by 100, 98, and 65 percent respectively around 2018 (see Desta, 2019). However, the recent civilian unrest in Ethiopia has triggered not only attacks against civilians but also the destruction of health and school facilities. For example, Habib (2022) estimates that 1.7 million children lost access to education because their parents were displaced.

Prior to 2018, since Ethiopia pursued pro-agricultural investment, the poverty rate declined substantially. However, due to the outbreak of COVID-19, an estimated five to six million Ethiopians were facing food insecurity and need humanitarian and food aid. In addition, though gender equality was one of the main goals of Abiy's reform agenda, Ethiopia scored a very low 0.517 points on the Gender Inequality Index (BTI, 2022).

Table 2

Ethiopia's Human Development Index Trends, 2010-2022

Year	Life expectancy at birth	Expected years of schooling	GNI per capita (2017 PPP\$)	HDI value
2010-2016	64.0	8.5	1,639.3	0.450
2017	65.9	8.6	2,010	0.474
2018	66.2	8.7	2,094	0.478
2019	66.6	8.8	2,207	0.485
2020				0.49
2021	--	--	--	--
2022	--	--	--	--

Source: UNDP, Human Development Report 2020, 2022. 0.550-0.699 = medium; ≤ 0.549 = low.

Political Factors

As reviewed before, some overarching political factors that can contribute to state fragility include the decline of a leader's legitimacy, internal instability, the intervention of invading external actors, the massive movement of refugees, and the aggravation of humanitarian issues by the internal displacement of people.

Throughout the centrist feudal monarchy and the unitary military dictatorship era, Ethiopia was on the brink of a colossal failure. During the Ethiopian Peoples' Republic Democratic Front (EPRDF) era, Ethiopia's social economy was on a growth trajectory. Forming ethnic-based federalism, the EPRDF helped Ethiopia to remain relatively politically stable. Stated in simple terms, the formation of federalism by the EPRDF was highly valued because it promised each region the opportunity to develop, promote, and preserve its languages and culture. Being grounded in a state-centered form of democratic federalism, each region in Ethiopia had a share of political power. Though positions in the various government departments were assigned according to an ethnic-based quota system, the government bureaucracy was managed by civil servant functionaries who were primarily recruited on merit.

Starting in 2017, the laziness of the EPRDF drove the country into political unrest. That is, the unemployed and frustrated youth began causing turmoil throughout the Ethiopian landscape. Consequently, Abiy Ahmed emerged as the chair of the EPRDF ruling coalition party and ended up being Ethiopia's prime minister in 2018. After assuming political power, Abiy released political prisoners, played a role in removing some opposition groups from the list of terrorist groups, and implemented the formation of the first gender-balanced (10 women and 10 men) cabinet. By signing the joint declaration of peace and friendship with President Isaias of Eritrea on July 9, 2019, in Saudi Arabia, the ties between Ethiopia and Eritrea were normalized and Abiy was awarded the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize (Reuters, 2018).

Paradoxically, as soon as Abiy became a peace laureate he quickly transformed into a "driver of war". His collaboration with Isaias, the hideous dictator of Eritrea, enabled him to annihilate the historically noted monasteries and Muslim cultural heritage sites in Tigray and exterminate the people of Tigray.

Over the defiance of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Front (EPRDF), in the economic arena, Abiy unilaterally reversed Ethiopia's growth-generating developmental state model into a token "neo-liberal model".

Thereby, Abiy gave unflinching orders to his ministers that the lucrative state-owned mega-companies, such as Ethio-Telecom, the electric company, and the booming Ethiopian Airlines, be liquidated to private investors (Desta, 2019).

Undermining the country's 1995 Constitution, Abiy started (except for the administrative region of Tigray) appointing the heads for the eight administrative regions. Single-handedly, without undergoing the necessary steps for the establishment of political parties, Abiy finally dissolved the EPRDF and announced the formation of his own party, the Prosperity Party. Finally, using the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse, he manipulated members of Ethiopia's House of People's Representatives, the parliament's lower chamber, to endorse his desire to postpone the 2020 general election.

For constantly giving distorted views and his inability or unwillingness to speak truthfully to the Ethiopian people, Abiy lost his outright legitimacy as a leader worth trusting. For example, Abiy blamed the members of the Ethiopian parliament of not allocating an adequate budget to Tigray, when in fact he was the one who collaborated with Eritrean and Somalia external forces to impose a "de facto humanitarian blockade" to systematically obstruct life-saving medicine and food from reaching Tigray (De Waal, 2021).

What remains clear is that, compounded by the Tigray war, the various civil wars, violence, and the new wave of religious wars, Abiy has triggered throughout Ethiopia a huge human cost with thousands killed, more than 60,000 Tigrayans having fled to Sudan, and millions displaced and roaming throughout the country (Nunis, 2021). Citing credible data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, for example, Habib reports that the conflict and violence in Ethiopia have caused "...over 5.1 million to be displaced within Ethiopia in 2021—triple the number reported there in 2020 and the highest figure recorded for any country in a given year" (May 28, 2022).

Summary and Policy Implications

Messner (2018) persuasively argues that no country wishes to be categorized as a fragile state. Nonetheless, Robel (2021) and the Fund for Peace (2018) have characterized that Ethiopia is currently progressing toward fragility. Given this, the purpose of the study was to review the literature on fragility, develop a theoretical framework lens that depicts fragility, and then empirically test Ethiopia's current condition.

When observed through the lens of fragility using a longitudinal analysis—economic, social, and political indicators—we wholeheartedly agree with Roble (2021) and the Fund for Peace (2022), that, currently, Abiy's Ethiopia has passed beyond fragility and is heading towards balkanization. Being a deceitful leader, Abiy has lost the legitimacy that he won earlier. Strikingly enough, Abiy's current government has failed to provide state function to his people. He caused the incursion of Ethiopia's sovereignty by inviting Eritrea's, Somalia's, and Sudanese external forces to invade Ethiopia.

Currently, Ethiopia is faced with a boundless economic disaster. It is entrenched with skyrocketing unemployment. The scourge of inflation has made the cost of basic services intolerable. Highly atrocious and genocidal wars have precipitated Ethiopia's external debt to be unbearable. By encouraging armed conflict and widespread insurgencies, Abiy also has inspired social tension and deep humanitarian crises in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia's socio-political and economic landscape glares fragility. The policy implication that can be drawn from the study is that concerned Ethiopians need to form a transitional arrangement of a united front of Ethiopian con-federalist forces that could address the underlying and root causes of existing shocks and reengineer

Ethiopia's capacity to exit from fragility to resilient recovery, leading to more sustainable pathways to development (UNDP, 2014).

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