The Intersection of Political Decay: A Multi-Dimensional Analysis of Ethiopia's 2020 Election Postponement and Its Impact on National Stability

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Ethiopia operates under a parliamentary system with the Federal House of Peoples' Representative (HPR) and regional State Councils serving as the supreme legislative bodies. While five successive parliamentary elections were held regularly since 1995, the majority lacked genuine competition. In August 2020, the country was set to hold its sixth general election; however, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) postponed the polls due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper argues that the delay exacerbated conflicting political demands among elites, impacting national stability. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology, the study concludes that deep-seated mistrust and a low level of institutionalization within democratic bodies contributed significantly to the ensuing political crisis and social unrest. **Keywords:** Election Postponement, Political Stability, Institutionalization, Elite Competition, COVID-19, Ethiopia.

Introduction

The formation of the modern Ethiopian state involved a long process of unified nation-building that gained momentum in the mid-19th century. Following the fall of the Derg military junta in 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) introduced a constitution based on ethnic federalism and a parliamentary system. While international standards mandate regular, periodic elections, the COVID-19 pandemic forced at least 70 countries to postpone forthcoming polls in 2020. In Ethiopia, this postponement and the subsequent extension of the government's term through constitutional interpretation triggered intense political discord.

Statement of the Problem: Ethiopia is consistently ranked as a fragile and unstable state, placed 21st in the 2020 Fragile States Index. This instability is rooted in deep-rooted tensions that are dangerous for nation-building. The 2020 pandemic reached Ethiopia at a time when security was already precarious due to inter-communal violence and insurgent activity. The core problem identified is the lack of consensus on the constitutional legality of term extensions, with the ruling party rejecting "extra-constitutional" solutions proposed by the opposition, such as a transitional government.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Conceptualizing Political Stability and Instability: Political stability is a multifaceted concept that most political scientists define from a behavioral perspective, allowing for measurement through verifiable techniques. In scholarly discourse, stability is often categorized into five distinct approaches: the absence of violence, governmental longevity, the existence of a legitimate constitutional regime, the absence of structural change, and multifaceted societal attributes. A stable polity is viewed as a peaceful, law-abiding society where decision-making and socio-political changes result from institutionalized procedures rather than conflict or aggression.

Conversely, political instability lacks a single, unified definition and is often associated with diverse phenomena

ranging from peaceful demonstrations to full-scale civil war. It is understood as a high propensity for regime or government change, or a high incidence of political upheaval. In "new states," instability is frequently attributed to cultural heterogeneity, low regime legitimacy, economic backwardness, and structural simplicity.

Theoretical Framework: The Institutional Approach: This study utilizes the **Institutionalization Theory** proposed by Samuel Huntington. Huntington argues that political stability is fundamentally a matter of "political order," which is determined by the level of institutionalization of political organizations and procedures.

- **Measuring Institutionalization**: This process is measured by the adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence of organizations.
- **Political Decay**: Instability is seen as a function of the "decay" of political institutions. For instance, corruption can weaken the bureaucracy and governmental procedures, thereby generating instability.
- **Autonomy and Coherence**: Huntington posits that government intervention and excessive influence on democratic institutions are indicators of low institutionalization, occurring when institutions lack the autonomy to act as impartial arbiters.

The Role of Elections in Democracy and Stability: Elections are an integral part of the democratic process, enabling citizens to periodically choose their leaders fairly and freely. They serve as a major instrument for leadership recruitment, a key to participation, and a method of giving consent to the government. However, elections can also provide entry points for violence and conflict due to the competitive "winner-loser" dichotomy. Stability can be derailed when incumbent governments attempt to change constitutional rules or term limits to favor their own retention of power.

Historical Context of Elections in Ethiopia (1995–2015): Since 1991, Ethiopia has held five successive general elections, characterized largely by a lack of genuine competition:

- **1995 and 2000 Elections**: These were conducted under conditions that favored the ruling EPRDF; the 1995 election saw no participation from major opposition parties. The 2000 election saw opposition participation, but they faced significant harassment and intimidation at the local level.
- **2005 Election**: A significant outlier where the political space was relatively opened, resulting in high voter turnout and genuine competition. However, post-election disputes led to violent crackdowns, the arrest of thousands, and a historic lost opportunity for democratization.
- **2010 and 2015 Elections**: These periods marked a hardening of authoritarian rule. The ruling party claimed a 99.6% victory in 2010 and 100% of parliamentary seats in 2015.

Election Postponement in Other Countries and its Impact on Political Stability

The global COVID-19 pandemic forced a critical reassessment of the principle that democracies must hold regular, periodic elections. Between February and August 2020, at least 70 countries and territories decided to postpone forthcoming elections.

Typology of Delayed Elections: To categorize the variety of causes for non-elections, scholars identify several ideal-types:

- **Humanitarian Postponements**: Triggered by emergency situations like the COVID-19 pandemic where holding an election threatens life.
- **Crisis Postponements**: Arising from political stalemates, constitutional crises, or violence.
- **Technical Delays**: Caused by the inability of Election Management Bodies (EMBs) to provide the necessary logistics or security.

Comparative International Case Studies: The impact of these delays on political stability varied significantly based on local legal frameworks and political consensus.

- **Mali**: Despite insecurity and the pandemic, Mali held parliamentary elections in March 2020. However, the elections were marred by low turnout and the kidnapping of an opposition leader, eventually serving as a catalyst for a serious political crisis and popular uprising.
- **New Zealand**: Proceeded with its 2020 general election, which translated into a landslide victory for the incumbent party. This case demonstrated that a successful pandemic response could boost government legitimacy and image.
- **France**: Attempted to hold local elections but faced significant legal and political challenges when trying to postpone the second round. The case highlighted the difficulties of postponing polls without clear constitutional provisions or broad political consensus.
- **Nigeria**: In 2015, the government controversially delayed elections due to security concerns regarding Boko Haram. While it drew heavy criticism, the eventual agreement between parties allowed for a transition of power to the opposition, showing that stability could be maintained through elite consensus.

The Role of COVID-19 as a Political Instrument: Global evidence suggests that while some countries postponed elections for public health, others may have used the pandemic to manipulate election dates to their advantage. In some contexts, holding or postponing an election was used as an intervening factor to extend power or serve a specific political agenda. This raises questions regarding legitimacy and democracy when the returning to "normal" can take years.

The 2020 Postponement in Ethiopia and Stability

Legal vs. Political Motivations: The research indicates that the 2020 postponement was driven by dual factors:
1. **Legal Grounds:** The pandemic made it impossible to conduct direct, free, and fair elections as mandated by the constitution.
2. **Political Interest:** 69% of study informants believed political interests played a role. Some argued that the delay allowed the newly formed Prosperity Party more time to consolidate power.

Perceptions of Institutional Independence: The 2020 election postponement brought the functional autonomy of Ethiopia's democratic and legislative institutions into sharp focus. According to the **Institutional Approach** used in this study, the level of institutionalization—measured by autonomy and coherence—is a direct determinant of political stability.

-   **The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE):** * While the NEBE is constitutionally mandated as an independent authority, findings indicate a significant crisis of confidence.

    o   Approximately **62% of study respondents** believed the NEBE lacked impartiality and was under the influence of the incumbent government.
    o   Critics argued that the ruling Prosperity Party had implicitly decided on a postponement before the NEBE's official announcement, positioning the Board as a tool for government policy rather than an independent umpire.
    o   Specific accusations arose regarding the registration of the Prosperity Party, which some political actors claimed was legitimized without meeting the rigorous pre-conditions required of other parties.

-   **The House of Peoples' Representatives (HPR):** * The HPR's role in resolving the potential power vacuum through constitutional inquiry was met with skepticism.

    o   **69% of informants** viewed the HPR's actions as biased, characterizing the decision to extend the government's term as "self-dealing" or "self-serving".
    o   The process was criticized for a lack of inclusivity, as the decision was reached without sufficient debate among stakeholders and shortly after the proposal of four limited options.

-   **The House of Federation (HoF):** * The HoF is the body charged with interpreting the Constitution, but its role in the 2020 postponement was viewed as high-stakes political maneuvers.

    o   **69% of respondents** felt the HoF lacked independence, noting a clear conflict of interest: by extending the term of the HPR, the HoF effectively extended its own term, as the two terms coincide.
    o   The handling of the Tigray regional state's defiance further deepened perceptions of bias, as the HoF moved to stop budget supports and federal relationships with the region, which many believe escalated tensions toward armed conflict.

Impact on Stability: The 2020 election postponement functioned as a "trajectory factor" that transitioned Ethiopia from a state of high tension into a state of active conflict and fragility.

-   **The Outbreak of Armed Conflict:** * The most severe impact was the breakdown of the relationship between the Federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

    o   The TPLF rejected the federal postponement as "unconstitutional" and held its own regional election in September 2020, asserting its own legitimacy while declaring the federal government "unelected".
    o   This defiance reached a climax that made armed conflict inevitable, resulting in a continuing humanitarian crisis and external military interference, such as Sudan's invasion of Ethiopian territory.

-   **Social Unrest and Ethnic Violence:** * The delay provided fertile ground for popular uprisings and localized violence, particularly in Oromia.
    o   While the murder of musician Hachalu Hundessa in June 2020 was the immediate catalyst, the underlying combustible environment was attributed to the government's unilateral decision to extend its term.
    o   The ensuing violence led to the destruction of significant investments (hotels, industrial parks), historical

sites, and churches, alongside the arrest of 7,000 people, including Oromo nationalist leaders.

- **Deteriorating Stability Metrics:** * Data from the **Fragile States Index (FSI)** confirms that Ethiopia's stability worsened significantly during this period.

o Ethiopia was ranked **21st in the world for instability in 2020**, a decline from its 23rd position in 2019.
o This trend highlights that the country was more fragile and politically unstable following the decision to postpone the 2020 election than it was in the preceding year.

- **The Collapse of Elite Consensus:** * The core of the instability lies in the "elitist nature" of Ethiopian politics, where a lack of trust among political parties means that any contradiction among the elite influences the peace of the entire nation.

The research found that **62% of key informants** agreed the postponement directly affected national stability, primarily because political parties used the pandemic as an instrument to pursue their own narrow political interests rather than public or national welfare.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the postponement of Ethiopia's 2020 general election significantly compromised national stability, transforming a global health emergency into a profound catalyst for structural and political crises. While the COVID-19 pandemic provided a humanitarian rationale for the delay, the domestic execution of this decision exposed a critical failure within democratic institutions—specifically the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), the House of Peoples' Representatives (HPR), and the House of Federation (HoF). Viewed through the Institutional Approach, these bodies failed to function as impartial arbiters, leading to a crisis of legitimacy as the ruling Prosperity Party was perceived to be utilizing constitutional interpretation to unilaterally extend its mandate in the absence of a shared political roadmap.

Academically, this instability is rooted in the dual drivers of elite mistrust and institutional decay. The "elitist nature" of the Ethiopian political landscape ensures that friction among leaders directly destabilizes the state; here, the inability to reach a consensus on a transitional "political solution" created a zero-sum environment that marginalized opposition forces. This was exacerbated by institutional decay, where a lack of robust institutionalization allowed the government to bypass broad consultation in favor of unilateral, "self-serving" decisions. Consequently, these actions were rejected by major regional actors, further eroding the inclusive foundations necessary for a stable federation. The immediate consequences of this political fragmentation were catastrophic, manifesting across three critical dimensions: the outbreak of armed conflict, widespread social violence, and increased state fragility.

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