



Poverty Reduction or Regime Legitimacy: Which Truly Drove EPRDF Developmental Foreign Policy Doctrine?

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Abstract

From 2002 to 2018, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (hereafter EPRDF) government redefined Ethiopia's foreign policy within a developmental doctrine. Despite its domestic implications, the foreign policy aspects of this developmental doctrine remain underexplored in academic literature. This article examined the interplay between poverty reduction and regime legitimacy as the primary drivers of the developmental doctrine. The study utilized primary data collected from key informants through interviews, as well as secondary sources obtained from relevant literature. The article argued that, despite the EPRDF's framing of its foreign policy around the developmental doctrine with a stated goal of poverty reduction, the main driver of the EPRDF's developmental foreign policy was the pursuit of regime legitimacy to govern the country. This policy was introduced during a period when the EPRDF regime was facing an internal political crisis (the TPLF split) and legitimacy deficits. This focus on regime legitimacy overshadowed commitments to long-term economic and political transformations. The regime instrumentalized development narratives as a political tool rather than for genuine poverty reduction. Consequently, the rhetoric of poverty alleviation was obscured by underlying political motivations, illustrating how developmental rhetoric was manipulated to serve regime survival. This also highlights the nature of governance in authoritarian regimes, where the rhetoric of economic growth is used to advance political agendas and regime legitimacy. Looking ahead, Ethiopia's experience under the EPRDF regime offers essential lessons for evaluating the relationship between developmental narratives and regime legitimacy in authoritarian governments.

Keywords: Developmental Doctrine, Ethiopia, Ethiopia's Foreign Policy, Political tool, Poverty Reduction, Regime Legitimacy

1. Introduction

In 1991, Ethiopia experienced three layers of dynamism that directly influenced its foreign policy: domestic political changes, regional geopolitical reconfiguration, and global dynamism. On the domestic front, regime

change paved the way for a new political settlement process, resulting in constitutional engineering, the redefinition of state identity, and the emergence of new state narratives (Clapham, 2017; FDRE Constitution, 1995). The new regime introduced a government

ideology and state narratives centered on developmentalism as a fresh state discourse (Ministry of Information, 2002). At the regional level, the disintegration of Somalia and the secession of Eritrea reconfigured the geopolitics of the Horn, significantly impacting Ethiopia's foreign policy process (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1996; Ministry of Information, 2002; Zahorik, 2014).

Globally, the end of the ideological rivalry between the US and the USSR, along with the adoption of new global norms under Pax Americana (Mearsheimer, 2001; Nye, 2011), has reduced Africa's strategic significance (Zahorik, 2014). This has introduced new challenges, crises, opportunities, foreign policy tools, and a multitude of emerging actors on a global scale (Cox, 2018). Liberal internationalism emerged as the dominant set of global rules, with international institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) acting as key instruments of these liberalizations (Nye, 2011). New conditions for foreign aid, including human rights, democratic governance, good governance, and humanitarian assistance, were integrated into the foreign policy domain (Nye, 2011; Oloruntoba & Falola, 2018). Later in the post-millennium, the rise of China as an alternative economic power and the global war on terrorism transformed the foreign policy landscape in both developed and developing countries.

Under these three layers of dynamism, by 1996, the EPRDF government introduced the country's first open foreign policy white

paper, marking a significant milestone in its political history (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1996). This initial framework was expanded and revised in 2002, evolving into a more detailed document titled the Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy (Ministry of Information, 2002). This revised policy emphasized development as the central pillar of Ethiopia's foreign and domestic agenda. Under the new foreign policy white paper (2002 policy), against the backdrop of poverty and backwardness, development rhetoric was prioritized as an existential necessity essential for Ethiopia's survival and progress. The EPRDF framed alleviating poverty and fostering economic growth as national security priorities (Clapham, 2017). Thus, the EPRDF's approach to foreign relations was formulated through the lens of development. The essences of other determinants of foreign policy, such as national pride, domestic initiatives, democracy, good governance, globalization, and international engagement, were assessed based on their connection to the principal goal of poverty reduction and development (Ministry of Information, 2002). This holistic view of policy-making reflects a "developmental doctrine," wherein each facet of government rhetoric is intricately linked to the pursuit of poverty reduction and economic growth, as described by Fana (2014) and Clapham (2017) as the securitization of development.

Researchers have evaluated the domestic aspects of developmental state assumptions in Ethiopia and found them to face significant criticism (Endalkachew, 2019; Mandefro, 2016; Zahorik, 2014). They concluded that the developmental state is an aspiration not

practiced in the Ethiopian context (Alemu & Mohammed, 2019; Endalkachew, 2019; Meberatu, 2023; Semahagn, 2018). Thus, the domestic landscape of the developmental state has been extensively studied (Abebe, 2018; Arkebe, 2015; Carothers & De Gramont, 2018; Clapham, 2017; De Waal, 2012; Endalkachew, 2019; Getasew, 2022; Lefort, 2013; Mebratu, 2022; Melakou, 2008; Melisew & Cochrane, 2019), while its foreign policy aspects remain under-explored. Consequently, there are no studies on the drivers of Ethiopia's foreign policy realignment from high politics to low politics (development). The drivers of the securitization of poverty and development, which are key priorities in Ethiopia's foreign policy and national security, remain an under-researched theme. The relationship between poverty reduction and regime legitimacy as primary drivers of the developmental foreign policy doctrine has not been thoroughly explored. A debate exists regarding whether poverty reduction or regime legitimacy truly drives the EPRDF's developmental foreign policy doctrine. This article addresses this gap by exploring what primarily motivated the initiation of the developmental doctrine in Ethiopia, by examining the interplay between the rhetoric of poverty reduction and the quest for regime legitimacy.

The article is organized into six sections. The first section served as the introduction. The second section discussed the research methodology. Section three addressed the general assumptions of the developmental state, the contextual assumptions of developmental doctrine in Ethiopia, and the rhetoric of poverty reduction as the

cornerstone of developmental narratives in Ethiopia. The fourth section analysed developmental doctrine as a tool for regime legitimacy in Ethiopia. Section five examined the relationship between poverty reduction and regime legitimacy as the dual aspects of developmental doctrine and identified the primary driver of developmental doctrine from the two options. Finally, the article concludes with remarks summarizing the findings.

2. Research Methodology

Methodologically, the article employed a qualitative research approach. The data for this study were generated from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were gathered from interviews with 15 selected key informants, including ambassadors, career diplomats, veteran diplomats, academics, and researchers with experience in Ethiopia's foreign policy decision-making, implementation, and studies. As foreign policy is an analytical issue, key informants for this study were selected based on their involvement and experiences in Ethiopia's foreign policy decision-making, implementation, and research. Secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, policy documents, archives, and reports from government and non-governmental organizations. Lastly, the collected data were triangulated and analysed using meta-synthesis techniques, which synthesize the discussions on the relationship between poverty reduction and regime legitimacy as the primary driver of the development doctrine in Ethiopia.

3. Developmental Doctrine: The Rhetoric of Poverty Reduction in Ethiopia

The philosophical foundations of the developmental state are linked to the dynamism of the post-World War II era, when many Asian countries sought freedom from the legacies of colonialism and discrimination (Amsden, 1989; Chang, 2019; Law, 2009; Johnson, 1982; Wade, 1990). Initially, the term was coined to describe the surprisingly rapid Japanese economic growth and industrialization following World War II (Brown & Fisher, 2019). Over time, policymakers and thinkers within the liberation movement articulated a vision for a developmental state that could confront these historical challenges and drive economic transformation (Law, 2009). This vision was informed by a growing body of economic thought that contested the prevailing neoliberal orthodoxy, which emphasized the primacy of the free market and a limited role for the state (night watchman dog). Instead, proponents of the developmental state advocated for a more active and constructive interventionist role for the state, highlighting the crucial functions of the state in guiding and coordinating the processes of industrialization and economic upgrading (Amsden, 1989; Chang, 2019; Johnson, 1982; Wade, 1990). The rapid economic growth and industrialization of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan served as credible examples of countries that thrived under the regulation of the developmental state approach (Radice, 2008).

Though the developmental state model has its philosophical and ideological foundations in East Asia (Amsden, 1989; Johnson, 1982; Wade, 1990), the late EPRDF chairperson and FDRE Prime Minister Meles Zenawi

developed a contextual developmental doctrine in Ethiopia, framing poverty as an existential national security threat (De Waal, 2012; Melese, 2006; Melese, 2011). Melese's developmental state ideology can be traced back to his unpublished dissertation, 'African Development: Dead Ends and New Beginnings' (Melese, 2006). The manuscript served as the justification and blueprint for a democratic developmental state in Ethiopia (De Waal, 2012). In this draft paper, Melese strongly opposed the free-market economy and privatization, which are the cardinal tenets of neoliberalism. Instead, he proposed alternative development ideas and practices for Africa, termed 'democratic developmentalism' (Melese, 2011 & De Waal, 2012). He envisioned his developmental doctrine within the broader context of the African Renaissance (Melese, 2006).

Melese's developmental doctrine contended that both the predatory state of Africa's initial post-colonial decades and the Washington Consensus were dead ends for the continent. In contrast, the development state model, which envisioned a strong and active state, could foster development, presenting it as a new beginning (Melese, 2006). Melese's developmental doctrine is based on two primary missions. The first mission was to centralize state rents and allocate them productively for long-term development goals. The second mission sought to steer the private sector away from rent-seeking activities and redirect it toward value creation (De Waal, 2012; Lefort, 2013; Melese, 2006).

Based on these theoretical premises, Melese articulated powerful contextual descriptions

that encapsulate his vision for economic growth and infrastructural development in Ethiopia. The theoretical foundation of developmental discourses in Ethiopia originated from leaders' traits (Clapham, 2017; De Waal, 2012; Lefort, 2013), the party ideology of revolutionary democracy (EPRDF, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c), the regime's quest for legitimacy (Asnake, 2011; Clapham, 2017; Mandefro, 2016), and global experiences (Melese, 2006). Notably, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was the architect of the developmental-state model in Ethiopia (Clapham, 2017; De Waal, 2012; Lefort, 2013; Meles, 2006; Meles, 2011). As Ethiopia adopted a state-led development model, its doctrine expressed ambitious transformative goals of poverty reduction and economic growth. Melese framed the essence of the developmental doctrine in Ethiopia by defining poverty as an existential national threat and development as a vital necessity (Asnake, 2011; Clapham, 2017; De Waal, 2012; Mandefro, 2016; Melese, 2006).

Central to Ethiopia's developmental doctrine is therefore the rhetoric of poverty as a national existential threat (Asnake, 2011; Mandefro, 2016; Meberatu, 2023; Nishi, 2013) and the securitization of development as a means of survival (Fana, 2014; Clapham, 2017). Melese frequently framed poverty as a shocking enemy (Asnake, 2011), describing it as an existential threat to national security (Asnake, 2011; De Waal, 2012). He positioned the developmental state model as the appropriate framework to overcome national shame, which, in Melese's words, stemmed from poverty and backwardness (ENA, 2014; EBC, 2016a). He claimed that Ethiopia has no enemies other than poverty

(Asnake, 2011) and asserted that other disagreements can be resolved through dialogue and negotiation (EBC, 2016a). When Columbia University students asked Melese about his focus as Ethiopia's Prime Minister, he responded, 'The main challenge in Ethiopia is poverty. As Ethiopia's Prime Minister, my focus is on overcoming poverty and ensuring food security (MACTVNOW, 2011). Similarly, when he was asked by Addis Ababa residents at public meetings in 1995 about his vision for Ethiopia in the next ten years, he stated that 'he wished to see all Ethiopians at least eat three times per day'. All of this resonated with his developmental doctrine centered on the rhetoric of poverty reduction.

Melese equated poverty to a predator that must be defeated through a developmental state model to ensure Ethiopia's future (Asnake, 2011; Melese, 2006; MACTVNOW, 2011). He emphasized that eradicating poverty is not an option; it is the very foundation of Ethiopia's survival as a nation under the dictum of 'we will make poverty a history' (Asnake, 2011). This framing imbues the developmental doctrine with a sense of existential urgency, mobilizing both domestic and international efforts to tackle poverty as a shared crisis. His developmental philosophy was further grounded in his other powerful Amharic speech, 'ሁሉም የጦር መሳሪያዎች ተቀጥቅጦ ወደ ማረሻ እና መዶሻ ይቀየራሉ', translating to 'All weapons are crushed and turned into plows and hammers'. This discourse represents the transformation of resources and energies previously dedicated to conflict into tools for productivity and development, condensing his vision of development as a means to

achieve peace and prosperity (Interview with KII-20, 20 July 2024). It also implicates the EPRDF policy shift, in the words of Ambassador Tekeda Alemu, from high politics to low politics (development) (Interview, 01 October 2024).

Ethiopia's developmental doctrine, underpinned by a powerful rhetoric that securitizes poverty as an existential national security threat, extends beyond domestic policy into a foreign policy framework. This approach integrates development with diplomacy, ensuring that Ethiopia's international engagement aligns with its quest for economic transformation (KTN News Kenya, 2012). A central theme in Ethiopia's developmental foreign policy doctrine is economic diplomacy, where economic growth serves as a tool for fostering international relationships (Ministry of Information, 2002). Since the initiation of the developmental doctrine, attracting investors, negotiating aid, promoting investment opportunities, and seeking foreign direct investment (FDI) have been set as the primary responsibilities of diplomats (Interview with KII-1, 07 July 2024).

The EPRDF government envisioned its foreign policy based on this developmental doctrine, which prioritized poverty as a national security threat and economic growth as a matter of national survival (Interview with KII-8, 19 January 2024). Melese argued that development is not separate from survival, but rather it is the central priority. The EPRDF's developmental foreign policy doctrine's fundamental premise was therefore the pursuit of development as a survival

agenda. Under this priority, the distinction between friends and enemies is defined by their role in advancing or hindering these integrated survival issues. Economic growth and the pursuit of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) were established as diplomatic priorities. In this framework, individuals, entities, policies, and strategies that contribute to development are depicted as allies in the pursuit of survival, while those that obstruct or fail to support this goal are depicted as adversaries (ENA, 2014; EBC, 2016a; Ministry of Information, 2002). All government actions and diplomatic activities were also narrated based on their contribution to the rhetoric of poverty reduction (Interview with KII-22, 24 July 2024).

However, practically speaking, the EPRDF's developmental doctrine has been criticized by academia (Endalkachew, 2019; Mandefro, 2016; Zahorik, 2014) as often being overshadowed by deeper regime political motivations, resulting in limited aggregate economic transformation. Contrary to the core principles of democratic developmental doctrine, which obligated the government to protect the private sector from rent-seeking and redirect it toward value creation, the EPRDF regime established party-affiliated private sectors and endowment rent seekers (Interview with KII-33, 2 October 2024). Due to this, the aspiration and rhetoric of economic transformation through mega projects, such as the Metal and Engineering Corporation (METEC) and large-scale sugar factories, remained on paper, and grand corruption prevailed (Interview with KII-6, January 18, 2024; Interview with KII-31, October 1, 2024). Instead, the EPRDF employed the rhetoric of poverty alleviation

as a powerful narrative to attract foreign support and justify its domestic policies, albeit at the expense of democratic backsliding, grand corruption, and human rights violations (Clapham, 2017; Mandefro, 2016; Nishi, 2013).

Furthermore, the EPRDF's developmental doctrine did not primarily emanate from eradicating poverty, nor did it meet the primary objective of economic transformation; instead, it was a rhetoric used by the regime to employ poverty reduction as a performance-based means of legitimacy. The primary driver of EPRDF's developmental foreign policy was the quest for performance-based regime legitimacy amid domestic (the split of TPLF) and regional (the Ethio-Eritrea war) crises (Endalkachew, 2019; Mandefro, 2016; Nishi, 2013; Zahorik, 2014). The following section examines how the EPRDF utilized the rhetoric of poverty reduction to consolidate power and enhance regime legitimacy by compromising genuine economic and political transformation.

4. Developmental Doctrine as a Leverage for Regime Survival and Legitimacy

In the contemporary political system, there are two sources of legitimacy: procedural and performance. Procedural legitimacy is based on normative features such as elections, the rule of law, and constitutionalism. At its core, procedural legitimacy hinges on democratic elections. Performance legitimacy, on the other hand, relies on the government's effectiveness in achieving objectives like economic growth and poverty reduction. In non-democratic regimes, success in economic development and poverty

reduction serves as a crucial source of regime legitimacy (World Bank, 2011).

Regime security has been a central component of Ethiopia's foreign policy since antiquity (Dima, 2009). In line with this, since 1991, the EPRDF regime has adopted different policy measures primarily to consolidate its power and maintain both internal and external legitimacy. Between 1991 and 2002, the EPRDF regime employed a combination of procedural and performance-based sources of legitimacy. Procedurally, the EPRDF attempted to justify its rule by introducing a new constitution (FDRE Constitution, 1995), which allowed for political pluralism, opened up political space, ensured media freedom, and incorporated a range of human rights provisions into the constitution (FDRE Constitution, 1995, Chapter Three). The international community was also optimistic about the beginning of a democratic process in the country, which is why they regarded the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi as one of the new generation of African leaders (Mandefro, 2016).

Side by side, the EPRDF regime claimed both charismatic and performance-based legitimacy, such as victory and sacrifice (Lyons, 2019), which I refer to in this paper as the Dede-bit legacy. The TPLF-led EPRDF government initiated organized propaganda regarding the TPLF's landslide military victory against the Derg regime, highlighting its sacrifice, persistence in the pursuit of freedom, and commitment to transforming the country. They asserted their legitimate right to rule based on victory and sacrifice (Interview with KII-33, 02 October 2024;

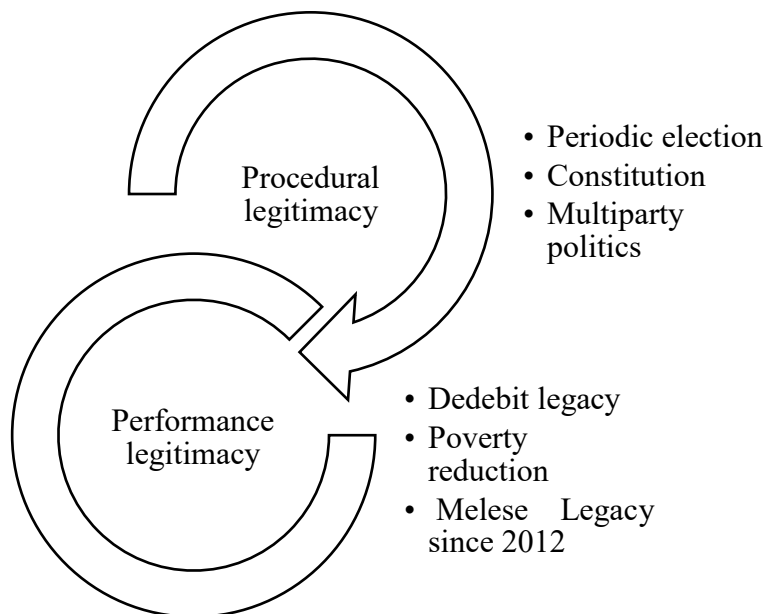
Lyons, 2019). Consequently, from 1991 to 2002, the EPRDF regime drew legitimacy from a combination of the Dedit legacy and periodic elections (Aalen & Tronvoll, 2009; Lyons, 2019; Nishi, 2013).

However, as Lyons (2019, P.7) rightly stated, the EPRDF appealed to charismatic leadership through the discourses of *Dedit legacy* gradually declined, and in the consecutive electoral defeats, the EPRDF had exhaustively proved its failure to gain legitimacy through democratic election too (Aalen & Tronvoll, 2009; Asnake, 2011; Clapham, 2017; Nishi, 2013). Although the FDRE's Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy was introduced in 2002, the EPRDF regime began to explicitly advocate for a developmental doctrine and poverty reduction as the Alpha and Omega of Ethiopia's domestic and foreign policy following its 2005 landslide electoral defeat. Nishi (2013, P.8) stated that

'the May 2005 general election was, by far, the greatest political defeat for Melese in his career as leader of Ethiopia'. Concurrent to this, Asnake (2011, P.3) detailed that;

After the debacle of the May 2005 elections in which EPRDF victory was controversial and the crackdown on the opposition parties, civil society and the media, the Ethiopian government seeks to strengthen its legitimacy on the sustained high rate of growth and infrastructural development that were witnessed in the country in the last several years.

Since then, the regime has explicitly appealed to other performance-based legitimacy- economic growth and poverty reduction (Mandefro, 2016), accompanied by pseudo-election (Aalen & Tronvoll, 2009), Dedit legacy (Lyons, 2019), and since 2012, Melese's legacy (Interview with KII-22, 24 July 2024).



Sets of the EPRDF legitimacy sources (compiled by the researcher)

Since then, the EPRDF regime has employed a developmental doctrine as a central strategy to consolidate power and legitimize its rule (Clapham, 2017). The government has emphasized economic growth, poverty alleviation, and infrastructure development as evidence of its effectiveness in transforming Ethiopia, thereby gaining popular legitimacy (Asnake, 2011; Clapham, 2017; Lefort, 2013; Lyons, 2019; Mandefro, 2016; Meberatu, 2023; Nishi, 2013; Semahagn, 2018). The regime has strategically utilized the rhetoric of developmental doctrine to secure legitimacy at two levels: it has legitimized its rule domestically by presenting itself as a champion of economic progress, despite a lack of democracy, and externally, it has appeared as a stabilizing force in the region and internationally by aligning with global development and security agendas, especially the global Poverty Reduction Strategic Programme (PRSP).

4.1. Internal Legitimacy

The EPRDF's developmental foreign policy doctrine was primarily leveraged for regime legitimacy and the consolidation of power (Lefort, 2013; Mandefro, 2016). Meberatu (2023) stated that consecutive elections in Ethiopia were the defining moment for the EPRDF regime's loss of democratic legitimacy, and this is why the EPRDF regime was completely inclined towards the rhetoric of developmental doctrine. Informants (Interview with KII-13, 28 January 2024; Interview with KII-22, 24 July 2024; Interview with KII-20, 20 July 2024) further claimed that the EPRDF's development doctrine was deeply intertwined with the party's political objectives, reflecting a deliberate effort to

instrumentalize the rhetoric of poverty reduction for regime survival and legitimacy. One of the informants argued that, in the process of establishing a developmental state, the EPRDF regime equated itself with state survival and developed a discourse equating EPRDF survival with state survival (Interview with KII-28, 25 September 2024).

Researchers such as Clapham (2017), Mandefro (2016), Meberatu (2023), and Semahagn (2018) have stated that the EPRDF's vested objective in its rhetoric of developmental doctrine was to use 'economic growth' as a guise to maintain and consolidate power. Furthermore, Fana (2014) argued that the securitization of development gave the EPRDF regime the credibility to justify the immediate need for state powers and the aggressive mobilization of resources, thereby ignoring agreed conventions, which in turn increased the power and stature of the ruling coalition. Concurrent to these senior diplomats from the FDRE Ministry of Foreign Affairs affirmed that under the auspices of a dichotomized rhetoric of developmental doctrine, the EPRDF regime revoked many senior diplomats from the ministry by the name of anti-development and employed 200 new diplomats at once under the guises of developmental armies (Interview with KII-2, 24 January 2024; Interview with KII-30, 01 October 2024).

At the same time, developmental doctrine was instrumentalized in stifling dissenting political voices (Gagliardone, 2014; Goitom, 2023; Semahagn, 2018). The senior researcher at the FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs stated that by prioritizing development over democratization, the

EPRDF regime justified its repressive measures as essential for achieving the broader goals of poverty reduction and infrastructure expansion (Interview with KII-19, 19 July 2024). This narrative allowed the regime to side-line democratic processes and suppress opposition voices under the pretext of pursuing economic transformation (Endalcachew, 2018). Using the rhetoric of mega projects and linear GDP growth as the case shows, the EPRDF justified its continued hold on power (Endalcachew, 2018; Semahagn, 2018).

The EPRDF government also broadcast a narrative that economic growth and stability required strong state control (MACTVNOW, 2011), framing strong state control as necessary for economic progress and poverty reduction (Clapham, 2017; Gagliardone, 2014; Lefort, 2013). Concurrently, Melisew and Cochrane (2018) argued that developmental doctrine served as an instrument for stifling democracy and as a justification for an authoritarian mode of governance, punishing dissenting voices, limiting political space, and a means to target the uneducated and those who fall prey to rent-seekers in the EPRDF political landscape. The regime suppressed political freedoms, framing dissent as a threat to stability and development (Gagliardone, 2014) using derogatory depictions such as chauvinists, narrow-mindedness, religious fundamentalists, Banda, anti-peace, anti-development, and warmongers as justifications (Clapham, 2017; EBC, 2016a; EPRDF, 2013a; EPRDF, 2013b). On the other hand, the EPRDF's developmental doctrine was portrayed as a necessary trade-off to ensure economic growth and

transformation in Ethiopia, positioning itself and its doctrine as the only viable option for Ethiopia's transformation (Endalcachew, 2018).

By promoting the ideology of the developmental state, the EPRDF positioned itself as the sole political force capable of achieving Ethiopia's transformation (Interview with KII-28, 25 September 2024). Through tight control of the media and civil society, the regime minimized dissent and amplified the success stories of its developmental agenda (Endalcachew, 2019; Gagliardone, 2014; Melisew & Cochrane, 2018; Semahagn, 2018). Gradually, the regime created dichotomized discourses: developmentalist and anti- or neo-liberalist discourses (Lazbae & Plannel, 2021). The discourse of Ethiopia's developmentalism is created in opposition to neoliberalism (Melese, 2006). The usage of neoliberalism steadily became analogous to imperialism in the 1970s and 1980s by the *Derg* regime (EPRDF, 2010; Fana, 2014).

The regime attached the prefix 'developmental' to all actors and actions perceived as in line with its developmental doctrine, and 'anti-developmental' or 'neoliberalists' or the 'yellow movement' to those suspected of opposing the doctrine (Interview with KII-31, 01 October 2024; Interview with KII-33, 02 October 2024). In these compliments, the regime created dichotomized discourses in which all expected supporters or gears of developmental doctrine attached prefix of development: developmental government, developmental civil service, developmental investors, developmental teachers, developmental journalism, developmental

army, developmental farmers/model farmers, developmental elites, developmental professionals, developmental scholars, and developmental police. In contrast, the opposing wings are characterized by the prefix "anti," such as anti-development, anti-peace, anti-Ethiopia, and anti-transformation. Gradually, the EPRDF government adopted the developmental doctrine as the primary path to Ethiopia's development, and EPRDF was regarded as the sole developmental party or vanguard party with the capacity and efficiency to lead a developmental state in Ethiopia (EPRDF, 2010; EPRDF, 2013a; EPRDF, 2013b; EPRDF, 2013c). Thus, the EPRDF regime introduced a developmental doctrine primarily as a guise to legitimize itself and consolidate political power.

4.2. External Legitimacy

The EPRDF's legitimacy was equally fragile at an external level following consecutive election failures (Aalen & Tronvoll, 2009; Lyons, 2019). Critics argued that since the 2005 election, the EPRDF government had exhaustively demonstrated that it would not gain legitimacy through democratic elections (Aalen & Tronvoll, 2009; Asnake, 2011; Nishi, 2013), and the regime faced skepticism and suspicion from international communities (Interview with KII-30, 01 October 2024). This was why the regime resorted to an authoritarian developmental model (Clapham, 2017; Lefort, 2013; Meberatu, 2023). Furthermore, one of Ethiopia's diplomats stated that 'TPLF led EPRDF continuously prioritized and struggled to emerge as a relevant force in the Horn of Africa' (Interview with KII-13, 28 January 2024). To achieve this, the party developed a low-profile foreign policy that

focused on trust-building and alignment with global priorities, such as poverty reduction, sustainable development, and regional stability (Interview with KII-29, October 1, 2024; Interview with KII-13, January 28, 2024). By securitizing poverty reduction through developmental doctrine, the EPRDF regime sought to secure international legitimacy, garner donors' development support, and attract foreign investment simultaneously.

5. Developmental Doctrine as Double-Edged Sword: In Search of the Sharp Sword

As discussed above, the interplay between the EPRDF's stated rhetoric of poverty reduction and its underlying political motives became evident. While the regime's developmental doctrine achieved cosmetic linear GDP growth and infrastructural development, it leveraged these gains for power consolidation and regime legitimacy, rather than promoting equitable distribution and long-term economic transformation. The following are Key areas where the interplay between the rhetoric of poverty reduction and real political motivation manifested;

The first manifestation of the primacy of regime legitimacy in EPRDF developmental doctrine was the existence of uneven development. Economic growth under the EPRDF was unevenly distributed, in favour of party-affiliated business classes and sectors of society, including endowments and the private sector. Although the EPRDF's developmental rhetoric stated the obligation to protect the private sector from rent-seeking and support value creation, in practice, the EPRDF created its rent-seeking endowments and party-affiliated private sectors (Interview with KII-22, 24 July 2024; Interview with

KII-13, 28 January 2024). The EPRDF regime established a complex parastatal economy comprising investment funds, state enterprises, and private companies, all of which were restricted to national investors supporting the EPRDF (Labzae & Plannel, 2021). Critics (Labzae & Plannel, 2021; Meberatu, 2023; Semahagn, 2018) further argued that the regime's developmental policies were not primarily dedicated to economic transformation but were designed to strengthen the TPLF's control over the state and its resources. A senior Ethiopian politician stated that the EPRDF's developmental initiatives often benefited party-affiliated enterprises, such as the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT) (Interview with KII-20, July 20, 2024), as well as influential developmental capitalists aligned with the regime (Labzae & Plannel, 2021). For instance, Labzae & Plannel (2021) depicted how, in response to the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), the EPRDF government developed its model of privatization, in which state enterprises were sold to endowment funds. These endowment funds have legally consisted of private holdings, but practically, they were entirely controlled by the central committee of the EPRDF member parties. Based on this, the two researchers concluded that the EPRDF privatization process is a fool's game in which *'what the state sells was bought by the party'* (Ibid, P.75).

The second manifestation of the primacy of regime legitimacy over poverty reduction was unmanaged displacement and social unrest. Large-scale development projects, such as dams and industrial parks, have led to the widespread displacement of communities

without adequate compensation or resettlement plans (Oakland Institute, 2013), and have often resulted in inadequate project works on the evicted land (Interview with KII-8, 19 January 2024). For instance, large families were evicted from their land to make way for sugar factories, but the project ultimately failed. Large investors acquired land in Gambella and Benishangul Gumuz by evicting households, but left the land unproductive (Interview with KII-18, 15 July 2024). This fuelled social unrest and contributed to growing opposition to the regime, particularly among marginalized ethnic groups (Labzae & Plannel, 2021; Lavers, 2024; Oakland Institute, 2013). Senior researchers at the FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs concurred with these views, claiming that the very essence of the developmental doctrine by EPRDF was a consolidation of power and regime survival (Interview with KII-18, July 15, 2024; Interview with KII-19, July 19, 2024). The two researchers argued that the EPRDF, by leveraging domestic vulnerability and the global shift toward a war on terrorism, initiated a developmental doctrine at the expense of democracy, democratic elections, and fair distribution of economic benefits (*Ibid*).

The third manifestation of the primacy of regime survival under developmental doctrine was the erosion of political space. As discussed in sub-section 4.1. Above, the EPRDF's developmental narrative often served as a justification for authoritarian governance. Using poverty reduction and fast economic growth as justification or cover, the regime tightly controlled political opposition, civil society, and independent media (Dereje,

2011; Endalkachew, 2019; Labzae & Plannel, 2021; Melisew & Cochrane, 2018; Meberatu, 2023). The EPRDF regime argued that stability and development required a strong and centralized authority (Brown & Fisher, 2019; Dereje, 2011; Labzae & Plannel, 2021; Melisew & Cochrane, 2018; Meberatu, 2023; Semahagn, 2018). This approach undermined democratic accountability and limited the space for alternative voices to emerge. Additionally, it hindered the sustainability of economic growth and the multilateral state-building process, which were the twin objectives of the EPRDF government. Thus, it implied that power consolidation and regime survival were the primary driving factors for the commencement of developmental foreign policy doctrine.

The fourth manifestation of the primacy of regime survival in EPRDF developmental foreign policy doctrine was the issue of access to the sea and port. The central rhetoric of EPRDF's developmental doctrine was economic growth. The regime's developmental foreign policy doctrine set poverty as the ardent enemy of Ethiopia and concluded that the core national security threats and existential dangers to Ethiopia originated from it. Contrary to this policy urgency, the EPRDF government undermined the role of ports and access to the sea in realizing sustainable development in Ethiopia. Abebe Teklehaymanot, former EPRDF government high ranking military officer argued that *'the denial of access to the sea for Ethiopia is a source of insecurity because it hampers development'* (Abebe, 2007, P.17). He further acknowledged that beyond economic reasoning, political

uncertainties and the influence of other foreign countries have made it very difficult for Ethiopia to rely on the ports of neighboring countries (Djibouti, Sudan, Kenya, or Somalia). He argued that due to political uncertainty and geopolitical rivalries, Ethiopia will constantly be vulnerable to blackmail (*Ibid*, P.17). Abebe Teklehaymanot further recapitulated Ethiopia's vulnerability due to the loss of access to the sea in the post-1991 period as follows;

Somalia's irredentism and Djibouti's position, Arabs' perception of Ethiopia as a Christian state and the advent of Moslem fundamentalism, the question of the Nile, and the role of Egypt in the Arab world make Ethiopia permanently vulnerable in its security and ability to use alternate outlet to the sea. Sudan, Somalia and Djibouti are members of the Arab League. The Port of Mombassa of Kenya is too far for most of Ethiopia and the Eritrean government is allegedly becoming an instrument of Egypt. Even tiny Djibouti tried to blackmail Ethiopia after the Eritrea-Ethiopia war (Abebe, 2007, P. 18).

Despite these vulnerabilities, the EPRDF undermined the role of access to the sea in Ethiopia's sustainable development, which many informants deemed a compromise of national interest for the sake of power consolidation (Interview with KII-13, 28 January 2024; Interview with KII-19, 19 July 2024). This is another indicator of the EPRDF's true intention regarding the interplay between regime survival and poverty reduction.

6. Concluding Remarks

This article examined the debates between the rhetoric of poverty reduction and regime

legitimacy as a primary driver of developmental doctrine in Ethiopia. As the above discussion illustrated, the debates on the interplay between the rhetoric of poverty reduction as a national survival agenda and an instrument of regime legitimacy reveal how authoritarian regimes have used short-term economic success at the expense of holistic political transformation to maintain power. Using the rhetoric of developmental doctrine, the EPRDF achieved short-term linear GDP growth and used it as justification to rule, at the expense of comprehensive and long-term economic and political transformation in the country. Thus, this paper argued that, despite achievements in linear GDP growth, the primary driver of the EPRDF's developmental foreign policy doctrine was the regime's pursuit of political survival and legitimacy. The essence of the commencement of the developmental doctrine in Ethiopia was to utilize poverty reduction and economic growth as a guise for performance-based regime legitimacy.

Thus, the study revealed that the EPRDF's foreign policy, underpinned by the developmental doctrine, discloses a multifaceted interplay between the rhetoric of poverty reduction and the regime's deeper pursuit of regime survival and legitimacy. Despite linear GDP growth, the country's aggregate economic transformation remained fragile. Lack of sustainability, grand corruption, failure of Megaprojects (for instance, METEC and Sugar Factories), unequal distribution, and concentration of economic returns in the hands of party-affiliated endowments and private sectors were implicated as regime security was the true driver of the commencement of

developmental doctrine in Ethiopia. The primary motivation was the consolidation of regime legitimacy and power. Deep-seated political motivations often camouflaged the rhetoric of poverty alleviation, and the regime leveraged developmental narratives to consolidate power, suppress dissent, and garner international support. This process highlights the nature of governance in authoritarian regimes, where the rhetoric of economic growth is used to advance political agendas and regime legitimacy. Thus, Ethiopia's experience under the EPRDF regime offers essential lessons for evaluating the nexus between developmental narratives and regime legitimacy in authoritarian governments.

7. References

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Appendix: Lists of Key Informants

No.	Code	Position	Place	Date of interview
1	KII-1	Veteran Ambassador	Addis Ababa	12 July 2024
2	KII-2	Former MOFA state minister and current FDRE ambassador to South Sudan	Addis Ababa	24 January 2024
3	KII-7	Former MOFA state minister and current FDRE ambassador to the AU	Addis Ababa	27 January 2024
4	KII-8	Ethiopia's Ambassador to the UAE	Addis Ababa	19 January 2024
5	KII-13	Career diplomat and Ethiopia's diplomat at the Ethiopian Embassy in Asmara,	Addis Ababa	28 January 2024
6	KII-6	Ethiopia's ambassador to Djibouti	Addis Ababa	18 January 2024
7	KII-18	Researcher, FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA)	Addis Ababa	15 July 2024
8	KII-19	Lead Researcher, FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA)	Addis Ababa	19 July 2024
9	KII-20	Ethiopian senior politicians, former CUD, Unity and EZEMA party officer	Addis Ababa	20 July 2024
10	KII-22	senior diplomat and Ethiopia's ambassador to Britain	Addis Ababa	24 July 2024
11	KII-28	Lecturer, the Institute of Peace and Security Studies, Addis Ababa University	Addis Ababa	25 Sept. 2024
12	KII-29	Former state minister and President of the Board of Trustees, CDRC Ethiopia	Addis Ababa	01 October 2024
13	KII-30	Veteran diplomat and CEO, Center for Dialogue, Research and Cooperation (CDRC)	Addis Ababa	01 October 2024
14	KII-31	Deputy Director, FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA)	Addis Ababa	01 October 2024
15	KII-33	Researcher at FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA)	Addis Ababa	02 October 2024