

The Transitional Justice Policy of Ethiopia and its Relevance for Peacebuilding

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Abstract

This article deals with the peacebuilding impact of the Transitional Justice Policy of Ethiopia (TJPE) through an explanatory case study approach that contextualises the discourse of transitional justice and peace within the specific context of Ethiopia. Drawing on existing literature on the peace implications of transitional justice systems, the study develops a framework that emphasises the need for a balanced approach that integrates retributive and restorative justice mechanisms. Foregrounding the TJPE, the article identifies both prospects and limitations. The processes of truth-seeking and accountability for past, recent and present human rights abuses, fighting the culture of impunity and building social trust are the primary prospects. However, certain factors could undermine the peacebuilding contributions of the transitional justice programme. These factors include political capture, the politics of striking mutual innocence pacts, predicaments of political legitimacy, harmonising reconciliation and justice and ongoing conflicts. Generally, beyond the textual and institutional design, the political system and its dynamics have much bearing on the effectiveness of the TJPE in bringing about durable peace.

Keywords: Ethiopia, impunity, peacebuilding, political transition, transitional justice

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1. Introduction

Ethiopia has a long and complex history of conflict with serious consequences for human rights. The political reforms introduced in 2018 vowed to usher in the political opening of the country and address human rights abuses and resentments. Some legislation that had come under fire from domestic and international political commentators and human rights organisations was amended between 2018 and 2020. Civil society and terrorism laws, enacted in 2009 before the 2010 general election, were examples of repressive laws in Ethiopia. In February 2019, the new government repealed the 2009 Civil Societies Law and enacted a new law that lifted the 10 per cent foreign funding limit, the highly domineering power of the Civil Societies Organization Agency in the internal activities of civil society and the lack of appeal system over the decision of the agency related to giving and cancelling registration licences (HRW, 2019). The reform continued and the Anti-terrorism Law was revised in January 2020 (VOA News, 2020).

The legal reform initiatives were reinforced with the public acknowledgement of abuses perpetrated by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the establishment of the currently non-existent Reconciliation Commission in December 2018. The commission, within a three-year term that ended in early 2022, had the mandate to study the causes and nature of conflicts and human rights abuses that had long persisted, as well as to carry out the task of truth-finding to solicit accountability and reconciliation. Meanwhile, the bloody war in Tigray broke out on 4 November 2020 and, since June of the same year, expanded into the neighbouring Afar and Amhara regions.

The investigation of the Tigray war was a collaborative effort between the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) and the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE). It produced reports of war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing committed by all parties involved in the conflict, which included the Eritrean Defence Force, with a lack of clarity on who committed which crimes. The war ended with the conclusion of the African Union (AU)-led Ethiopian Peace Process, at an event hosted in Pretoria, South Africa – subsequently dubbed the Pretoria Peace Agreement – on 2 November 2022. The event signalled the signing of the Agreement for Lasting Peace through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities between the Government of

the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). This agreement envisions "a comprehensive national transitional justice policy aimed at accountability, ascertaining the truth, redress for victims, reconciliation, and healing, consistent with the Constitution of FDRE and the African Union Transitional Justice Policy Framework" (AU, 2022). The Pretoria Peace Agreement also directs that the transitional justice initiative should be framed with contributions from all stakeholders and civil societies and then provide for public consultations and "formal national policymaking processes". After about a year and a half, in April 2024, the Ethiopian Federal Government enacted the Transitional Justice Policy of Ethiopia (TJPE).

In preparing the TJPE, the Ministry of Justice (2024) reported that, in addition to 58 national consultations and 22 workshops in late 2023, it held a series of validation workshops in Addis Ababa with key stakeholders. These included political leaders, representatives of human rights organisations, civil society, media, academia, embassies and United Nations (UN) offices, as well as diverse community representatives, such as victims, women's groups, youth and internally displaced persons. It was agreed that stakeholder participation was essential for fostering consensus. This article examines these engagements and debates. The article comprises three parts: elaboration of what transitional justice means; the link between transitional justice and peacebuilding in post-conflict societies; and appraising the implications of the TJPE in relation to the quest for durable peace in Ethiopia.

2. Transitional justice

Duthie (2017) defines transitional justice as mechanisms to address grave human rights violations, including war crimes and dictatorship-related abuses. According to Aiken (2016), the principles and procedures of transitional justice are diverse and shaped by the specific social, political and cultural contexts of each society. Legal accountability, reconciliation, truth-finding, reparations and non-reoccurrence or 'never again' are the most common elements of transitional justice.

2.1 Judicial accountability

Judicial accountability is one of the touchstones of the transitional justice process, especially in combating the culture of impunity, which often pervades post-conflict societies. On the application of the judicial aspects of transitional justice,

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there is a plethora of decision-making and theoretical complexity. One of them is how to exercise legal punishments in line with fair trials and due process, in the context of human rights abuses involving communities, historical resentments and political cleavages along various lines. Distinctions between levels of responsibility in targeting key leaders or organisers implicated in grave and systematic human rights transgressions rather than lower-level actors and involuntary accomplices invoke the nuanced coalescence of justice, peace, reconciliation and amnesty under the auspice of transitional justice. This coalescence brings the admixture of retributive and restorative justice predicated on reaffirming the rule of law and deterring future violations (Balint, 2012).

In transitional justice, the pursuit of accountability for past atrocities often involves a range of judicial mechanisms, each with its own strengths and limitations. National courts, ideally positioned to foster local ownership of the justice process, may nonetheless be hampered by a lack of capacity, independence or resources. Hybrid tribunals, combining elements of domestic and international law and personnel, offer a potential compromise, balancing local involvement with international expertise. International tribunals, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) (Buckley-Zistel et al., 2014), provide specialised knowledge and a degree of impartiality but can be perceived as external interventions. Furthermore, some societies have incorporated traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, like the Rwandan Gacaca Courts, which blend customary practices with formal legal structures to promote reconciliation and healing at the community level (Sarkin, 2016).

2.2 Truth-seeking and reconciliation

Truth-seeking initiatives facilitate healing by providing victims with a platform to confront past injustices (UN, 2022). Truth-seeking must ensure inclusivity and survivor protection. In line with that, community-based truth-seeking efforts that are often implemented in partnership with traditional local leaders and justice institutions of Indigenous and formal kinds have the potential to enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of transitional justice by promoting mutual understanding and reducing cycles of mistrust (ICTJ, 2023a, 2023b).

In transitional justice, establishing truth and reconciliation commissions is a common practice to investigate and document human rights violations that

occurred during conflicts as well as to encourage forgiveness. Truth and reconciliation commissions have, according to Cardenas (2007), the task of uncovering the truth, providing a platform for victims to share their lived experiences, and recommending measures to prevent future abuses while encouraging reconciliation through forgiveness and confessions. Specifically, reconciliation encompasses, depending on the context, dialogue and mediation programmes, community-based projects, educational campaigns, and commemorative activities. With all hard-to-ignore criticisms related to effectiveness and long-term viability, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is a well-known example that helped the country transition from apartheid to democracy by acknowledging past atrocities and promoting reconciliation (Aiken, 2016). In Northern Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement is another example of a transitional justice initiative with provisions of reconciliation using community dialogue forums and cross-community projects (Murphy, 2017).

2.3 Reparations

Reparations constitute a fundamental component of transitional justice in acknowledging the suffering endured by victims and facilitating their recovery, reintegration and empowerment (De Greiff, 2006). The details of reparation methods extend beyond mere financial compensation to encompass a wide range of support mechanisms, including access to healthcare, educational opportunities and symbolic acts such as public apologies and memorialisation efforts. The Peruvian government's response to its Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations offers a compelling example of a comprehensive reparations programme. By providing victims of internal armed conflict with financial compensation, healthcare, education and housing assistance, Peru sought to address both the material and psychological dimensions of harm, aiming to restore not only their well-being but also their sense of dignity (Mariezcurrena and Roht-Arriaza, 2006). Such multifaceted compensation measures are essential for acknowledging past injustices, validating victims' experiences and fostering long-term societal healing.

2.4 Institutional reforms

Institutional and legal reforms are the other crucial elements of transitional justice in rebuilding public trust and establishing fair governance systems that uphold human rights. They can include vetting and removing officials involved in abuses,

establishing oversight mechanisms and training personnel in human rights standards (Legide, 2022). Moreover, beyond human rights standards, the entrenchment of transparency and culpability within institutions and laws expands the relevance of transitional justice not only to address past abuses but also to contribute to a sustainable, peaceful society where citizens feel protected and respected. In most cases, reforming the justice and security system is considered the minimum exercise of reform to ensure public institutions operate legally in a manner not to perpetuate human rights abuses. The Rwandan experience reflects the degree to which institutional reforms are intertwined with transitional justice. For instance, in post-genocide Rwanda, extensive reforms were implemented in the judiciary, police and military to create more responsible and professional institutions (Anders and Zenker, 2015).

2.5 Non-recurrence

The principle of non-recurrence, also known as ‘non-repetition’, is the other significant component of transitional justice in the direction of ensuring that past human rights violations do not resurface again. This commitment requires a multifaceted approach involving legal, institutional, cultural and educational reforms to dismantle structures that enabled previous abuses (UN, 2024). Central to this effort is the use of symbolic and material expressions – such as monuments, museums and artistic representations – that not only commemorate historical atrocities but also serve as enduring reminders of a collective commitment to a future free from violence and oppression (Legide, 2022). Public memorialisation plays a crucial role in embedding narratives of justice, resilience and societal transformation, thereby fostering a culture of accountability and civic engagement.

What is more, beyond symbolic measures, non-recurrence necessitates institutional and legal reforms to strengthen democratic governance, uphold the rule of law and prevent state institutions from being misused as instruments of repression. This includes security sector reform, judicial independence and human rights education, all of which contribute to creating a robust framework that mitigates the risk of repressive governance and systemic abuses (ICTJ, 2023a, 2023b). Additionally, fostering a culture of peaceful conflict resolution, tolerance and mutual respect is essential for consolidating the ‘never again’ principle within societies transitioning from conflict or authoritarian rule. By embedding these values into national curricula, civil society programmes and legal frameworks, transitional justice can promote long-term social cohesion and democratic

resilience. Non-recurrence, therefore, is not merely a reactive safeguard but a proactive strategy for building a just, inclusive and sustainable future.

It is imperative to be aware that various challenges affect the success of transitional justice programmes. Effective transitional justice requires strong political commitment, leadership and resource allocation to confront past human rights abuses and implement legal and institutional reforms (Hansen, 2014). It is resource-intensive, often necessitating international assistance, particularly in post-conflict settings where domestic capacity is limited and the other key challenge is ensuring the meaningful participation of victims whose perspectives must remain central to truth-seeking, reparations and reconciliation efforts (Jones, 2020). For that reason, ongoing security threats frequently endanger victims, witnesses and justice practitioners at the risk of hindering the effective implementation of transitional justice. Additionally, from the viewpoints of legitimacy and long-term gains, the multidimensional processes of transitional justice must be culturally sensitive and adapted to the specific societal context (Jones, 2020:165–170). Given its complexity, achieving the objectives of healing divided societies and preventing violence recurrence requires well-designed policy frameworks and effective enforcement mechanisms.

3. Transitional justice and peacebuilding

Transitional justice and peacebuilding, while distinct to some extent, are fundamentally interconnected processes designed to address the consequences of conflict and authoritarian rule. Transitional justice centres on culpability, reconciliation and reparations for past egregious human rights violations, whereas peacebuilding emphasises institutional reforms crucial for preventing future violence (Baker and Obradovic-Wochnik, 2016:281–282). Despite such differences, it is important to underscore that both share the ultimate goal of securing sustainable peace. Their intersection is part of understanding contested terms like ‘peace by justice’, ‘justice via peace’ and ‘peace through justice’, which capture the fine line that must be drawn in the reconstruction of post-conflict societies (Clark, 2011:539). The interconnectedness of transitional justice and peacebuilding is illustrated by the European Union’s (EU) collaboration with the ICTY, which aimed to integrate justice processes with broader peacebuilding efforts (Baker and Obradovic-Wochnik, 2016:282).

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There are some nuanced controversies between transitional justice and peace. One is on the peace-nurturing utility of courts. While the judicial instruments of transitional justice can deter impunity and foster accountability, indictments could often face significant setbacks, particularly in multi-ethnic, multi-religious and conflict-prone societies. Efforts such as the ICTY's indictments during the Bosnian civil war or the International Criminal Court's (ICC) 2009 arrest warrant for Sudan's former ruler, Omar al-Bashir, illustrate how justice processes can be perceived as targeting specific ethnic or political groups thereby intensifying grievances (Akhavan, 1996; Oette, 2010). At the same time, however, unresolved injustices often serve as root causes of conflict, particularly in deeply divided societies experiencing identity-based civil wars (Hyden, 2015). Strict judicial indictments and proceeding initiatives could inadvertently exacerbate cycles of violence and create perceptions of 'witch hunts' among perpetrators' ethnic or political co-groups. The UN's 'peace over justice' approach, which incorporates perpetrators into peace processes, has some stability-related advantages, even though it still has a strained relationship with combating impunity (Baker and Obradovic-Wochnik, 2016:284). That takes the perennial dilemma between peace and culpability towards what Kerr (2007) describes as a symbiotic relationship between peace and justice. Therefore, for transitional justice to effectively contribute to long-term peace, it is indispensable to harmonise retributive and restorative justice.

Furthermore, Fraser (2008) highlights the importance of representation, recognition and redistribution for transitional justice to deal with structural socio-economic and political inequalities as root causes of conflict. However, liberal models often fail by prioritising state-centric frameworks while neglecting local sociopolitical realities (Baker and Obradovic-Wochnik, 2016). The failures of transitional justice in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Bosnia illustrate how inadequate local participation, lack of socio-economic considerations and politicisation can deepen divisions rather than foster reconciliation (Jansen, 2013; Arnould, 2016). Similarly, in Northern Ireland, poorly defined objectives undermined the legitimacy and impact of transitional justice efforts, limiting their contribution to sustainable peace (McGrattan, 2010:167–169; Baker and Obradovic-Wochnik, 2016:293–294). To be effective in politically fragmented and post-conflict multi-ethnic societies, transitional justice must integrate inclusive representation, redistributive politics, power-sharing mechanisms and diversity accommodation (McGrattan, 2010:167–169).

4. The TJPE and peacebuilding

Despite Ethiopia's long history of conflicts and human rights abuses, initiatives of transitional justice are very rare. In each major regime change, the culture 'punishes' the leaders of the preceding government. During the 1974 revolution, the Commission of Inquiry established by the Provisional Military Administration in July 1974, investigated and documented the wealth of some of the top-ranking leaders of the monarchical rule of Haile Selassie. It had no mandate to exercise judicial accountability and reconciliation nor the influence to stop the forceful purge of the officials by the military with extrajudicial executions and illegal detention. Following the Derg era, characterised by human rights abuses, including the Red Terror, the Transitional Government established the Office of the Special Prosecutor in 1992 (Proc. 22/1992) to prosecute those responsible for the abuses. However, it lacked a comprehensive framework for addressing the broader legacies of the past and formal mechanisms for amnesty, reconciliation and reparations (Tronvoll, 2013). These conditions severely constricted the potential contribution of the Special Prosecutor to peacebuilding. So, historical precedent underscores the importance of a more holistic approach to transitional justice in Ethiopia.

4.1. The 2024 TJPE

In November 2022, The Ethiopian Ministry of Justice formed the Transitional Justice Working Group of Experts (TJWE) of 13 independent experts. TJWE had the responsibility to carry out public consultations to produce the draft version of the TJPE. On 17 April 2024, the Council of Ministers adopted the TJPE. The extensive objectives of the policy encompass resolving historical injustices and human rights abuses, advancing justice and suitable peace (TJPE, 2024:1). It has three parts: the definition of terms, the detailed mechanisms of transitional justice and the roles of the government and other stakeholders.

The TJPE (2024:1) stresses the need to address recurring human rights violence and foster lasting peace and justice. The centrality of criminal accountability in the policy has the purpose of upholding international and domestic human rights obligations that the state has to respect and enforce. Section 2.1.2 of the TJPE (2024) accentuates the condition of criminal responsibility for high-level offenders, while alternative processes of reconciliation and amnesty are applied to those involved in serious human rights violations without significant criminal

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responsibility. In this case, as part of the job of the Truth-seeking and Reconciliation Commission, it applies a conditional amnesty framework rather than a blanket amnesty that could undermine accountability and violate international standards of transitional justice as well as the AU Transitional Justice Framework (2019). Accordingly, under the TJPE, serious human rights violations and significant criminal involvement are ineligible for amnesty. Moreover, even the privilege of amnesty is contingent upon specific criteria: offenders must cooperate in truth-seeking, admit guilt, issue public apologies and agree to participate in reconciliation efforts. Furthermore, in Section 2.3 (2024), the TJPE, with the objective that offenders' reintegration does not result in vengeance or social division, orders that the process of amnesty is to be guided by transparency and victim-centred principles.

Overall, the TJPE envisions the integrated implementation of multiple mechanisms common to transitional justice initiatives such as truth-seeking, public disclosure, reconciliation, selective prosecution, reparations and reforms. It incorporates measures to prevent the recurrence of human rights abuses by promoting legal and institutional reforms to strengthen the rule of law and human rights protections. The institutional reforms focus on building the capacity of the justice and security sectors, which are crucial for upholding citizens (see Section 2.5.1, at Transitional Justice Policy, 2024). On reparation, the TJPE Section 2.4, creates a holistic and comprehensive reparation system through which individuals and communities can be assisted in dealing with their human rights violations. Accordingly, the measures taken are those of restitution, support, healing, commemoration and public apology, appropriately adapted to the form and degree of harm inflicted. At the heart of this policy is a public apology by the state and provision for the key needs of victims in a vulnerable group, including women, children and the elderly. The TRC, through an independent professional body under it, oversees the reparation process to ensure that it is conducted effectively with coordination between amnesty, truth-seeking and reconciliation.

4.2. The TJPE and its relevance for peacebuilding: Prospects and challenges

Conflicts in Ethiopia are a complex phenomenon rooted in historical grievances, ethnic tensions, political competition and resource scarcity. Addressing these issues requires a sustained commitment to peacebuilding through practising inclusive governance, addressing historical injustices, promoting inter-group

dialogue, ensuring equitable resource distribution, strengthening the rule of law and empowering civil society actors. Only through a comprehensive approach that tackles the root causes of conflict and fosters a culture of peace, can Ethiopia build a stable and prosperous future for all its citizens. In this regard, the recently inaugurated TJPE holds promise, as Aalen (2018) declared: “Ethiopia is in upheaval” during the prelude time of the recent political change related to the EPRDF. The TJPE has the potential to contribute to the peacebuilding process, as discussed below.

4.2.1. Prospects

Addressing grave human rights violations

The TJPE (Part I) elaborates on major human rights abuses. It includes those systemic, large-scale, or persistent crimes, which include genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, extrajudicial killing, forced disappearance, inhumane treatment, rape, sexual violence, forced displacement, child abuse, crimes on persons with disabilities, crimes based on ethnicity, political outlook and religion, or those crimes classified as major human rights violations and international crimes. This list of human rights abuses, together with the time scope of the TJPE (see Section 2.6, at Transitional Justice, 2024) to apply accountability since 1995 and to undertake truth-seeking, reconciliation and compensation as far back as possible, depending on the availability of evidence and information, is significant for a sustainable peace.

Considering the time benchmark of the TJPE’s judicial culpability process – since 1995 – the transitional justice will address major human rights violations during the EPRDF and onwards. This period is characterised by conflict and political suppression that resulted in gross human rights abuses. These include ethnic and religious-based atrocities, civilian mass killings, torture, inhumane treatment, forced mass displacement, post-electoral mass shootings and opposition detentions. Since the political transition of 2018/19, Ethiopia has experienced a great surge in ethnic-based violence and armed conflict. Various reports by concerned bodies document the severe consequences of the conflicts, which include war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing (Amnesty International, 2020; HRW, 2021). Thus, without rejecting the criticism that it addresses only post-1995 crimes, the TJPE is mandated to bring about justice to the overall human rights transgressions committed for more than a quarter of a century.

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Reconciliation and trust-building

In a deeply divided society like Ethiopia, where ethnic tensions have fuelled conflicts and human rights abuses, transitional justice mechanisms are crucial for rebuilding trust between communities and the government. Conflicts formed around ethnic politics and their escalation into armed violence have threatened the existence of Ethiopia (Bieber and Goshu, 2019). That has affected the social cohesion of the society. The reconciliation part of the TJPE has the task of offsetting the deepening social division. The TJPE (Part II) defines reconciliation as a complex, multifaceted process intended to address conflicts, historical injustices and societal divisions. In other words, it is a means to directly confront and repair injuries, mistrust, hatred, resentment and alienation that have resulted from human rights violations over the years.

The social implications of reconciliation are typically interrelated with rebuilding broken relationships, restoring social cohesion and establishing a durable foundation for a more just and equitable society. These implications of reconciliation are further strengthened by the policy's emphasis on truth-seeking and public disclosure towards achieving meaningful and comprehensive healing. Through mechanisms of truth-seeking, the policy enables an in-depth exploration of the root causes and long-lasting impacts of historical injustices, including ethnic violence, political repression and systemic discrimination.

Acknowledging the pain and suffering of victims and giving them space to speak openly about their experiences helps to rebuild trust and resilience. Communities with access to such processes often experience reduced levels of hostility and increased social cohesion (Clark, 2010). In the same way, by facilitating public accountability and truth-telling, the TJPE can address past grievances comprehensively and transform the often-painful history into an opportunity for learning, understanding and social renewal. Publicly documenting human rights violations not only provides a pathway for justice but also discourages impunity in setting a precedent that atrocities will not be repeated without consequence. This aspect of reconciliation policy reflects global best practices; in Rwanda, truth-telling and accountability measures have been integral to post-genocide rebuilding and have helped to significantly reduce the recurrence of conflict (Staub, 2011). In Ethiopia, transparency is similarly expected to help bridge ethnic divides and foster a shared national narrative, encouraging diverse groups to come together with a renewed commitment to peace.

Preventing recurrence

As criminal proceedings against individuals responsible for severe human rights abuses aid in averting the culture of impunity, the integration of reconciliation with truth-seeking and public disclosure in the TJPE helps prevent the recurrence of crimes and supports the establishment of lasting peace. In addition, with the objectives of preventing future violations of human rights, especially among vulnerable segments of society and strengthening criminal justice capacities to curb such human rights abuses, the reform component of the TJPE (see Section 2.5) aspires to develop legal and institutional frameworks that advance the respect for human rights, promote good governance and reinforce the rule of law. These include national and regional justice, security and media institutions and organisations accountable for safeguarding human rights.

On reform, section 2.5.1 of the TJPE pays special attention to those institutions responsible for upholding human rights and preventing the repetition of past crimes (TJPE, 2024). That would facilitate the active engagement of institutions like the EHRC, the National Dialogue Commission (NDC), the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Peace in the accountability, truth-seeking, reconciliation, reparation and reform aspects of the TJPE. This will strengthen the TJPE's objective of entrenching the values of human rights and peace in both the society and the state apparatus.

The EHRC has been a vital player in monitoring human rights violations – such as gender-based violence – in past conflicts and has been vocal in its criticism of the government's role in human rights abuses (OHCHR, 2024). For this reason, the inclusion of the EHRC in section 3.2.1 of the TJPE (TJPE, 2024) in monitoring the implementation of the TJPE and the achievement of its objectives is imperative to prevent the reoccurrence of human rights abuses. Likewise, the role of the NDC in monitoring the implementation of the TJPE is key to resolving recurring conflicts stemming from history and social structures. It is well placed to contribute towards the alignment of initiatives for the peaceful resolution of political conflicts with the justice, reconciliation, truth-seeking, reparation, and reform frameworks of transitional justice. The reform mechanism of the TJPE, accompanied by fact-finding, judicial accountability, reconciliation and reparation, are vital tools that, according to the AU Transitional Justice Policy Framework (2019), have the potential to encourage acknowledgement of atrocities and promote social cohesion

through inter-ethnic and political reconciliation. However, some challenges could arrest the peacebuilding objective of the TJPE.

4.2.2. Challenges

Political capture

In Ethiopia's highly polarised political environment, the risk of political capture of the TJPE is significant. Historically, transitional justice efforts in Ethiopia have been susceptible to political manipulation, as seen with the Reconciliation Commission established in 2018. The commission, despite its mandate to address past injustices, was perceived by many as a tool to legitimise the Prosperity Party's political agenda, particularly in the aftermath of the TPLF's exclusion from national politics. A similar risk exists with the current TJPE. There are concerns that the Prosperity Party, facing declining legitimacy due to its role in the Tigray conflict and ethnic tensions across the country, could use the policy to target political opponents and shield its own members from culpability. To safeguard against political capture, the TJPE must ensure transparency, inclusivity and independence. This includes the full participation of opposition parties, civil society organisations and victim groups in the implementation process. Given the possibility of the Prosperity Party's legitimacy decline for various reasons – mainly ethnic-based tensions and conflicts – there are well-founded grounds for concern that it could instrumentalise the transitional justice processes of judicial accountability and truth-seeking to accuse and disenchant its political opponents, armed rebel groups and others. This was a highly recurring matter vis-à-vis the ex-Reconciliation Commission and its instrumentalisation to victimise the critics of the government and former ruling elites of the EPRDF, notably the TPLF (Africa News, 2019).

In Ethiopia, “the flawed and instrumentalist implementation of the contested justice processes and the mismanagement of the narrow window of opportunity led to unprecedented societal violence and new political complexities” (Legide, 2022:1). It shows the likelihood that the government exploits the TJPE to assert its innocence while shifting the blame of accountability for human rights abuses to its contenders. The exclusion of armed insurgents from the process of transitional justice and the NDC could exacerbate the possibility that the ruling party could capture the policy. In this case, the potential gain of the TJPE to promote peace using the deterrence objective of judicial responsibility becomes incomplete.

Moreover, as data from post-conflict societies show that reconciliation policies are more effective when accompanied by institutional reforms (UN, 2019), the TJPE should establish independent oversight mechanisms to prevent the executive from exerting undue influence over the judicial processes. Additionally, the Special Attorney General should be tasked with prosecuting major perpetrators. The absence of international oversight has led civil society and experts to question the policy's impartiality and its ability to gain public trust. Including international actors in accountability mechanisms, some argue, would strengthen Ethiopia's transitional justice framework, especially given ongoing conflicts in regions like Oromia and Amhara (GCR2P, 2024a, 2024b; HRW, 2024a, 2024b; ISS, 2024). Therefore, the solution lies in the commitment of the incumbent to allow enough room for the independent functioning of the mechanisms of the TJPE, notably that of the judicial proceedings and to respect their decisions and encourage the participation of contending political groups.

Public resistance

The political context of the TJPE significantly determines its effectiveness in bringing about stability. Even though regime transition is not the Ethiopian case, the transitional justice initiative can be considered as an element of the recent political reform. Legide (2022:22) states that “analysis of ambiguous, non-regime transition in Ethiopia finds that implementation of transitional justice measures and state compliance efforts in the absence of typical regime change and troubled political situation presents complex challenges”. The challenges are relevant to the possibility that the public perceives the TJPE as the artefact of the ruling party and government, which is not well suited to the expectations of fundamental political change related to the constitutional system, ethnic politics, development and democracy. Given the contention and unstable politics of Ethiopia, the public sentiment towards the policy could be a mixture of scepticism and hope. Despite scepticism about the policy's overall effectiveness in addressing ethnic tensions and political violence, the reparation and memorialisation components may garner significant public support.

More importantly, as the prevalence of many victim groups is inevitable in conflict-affected regions such as Tigray, Oromia and Amhara, the desire for compensation, justice, accountability, rehabilitation, public apologies and memorial initiatives is an inescapable component in the implementation step of the TJPE. This will have repercussions on the policy in terms of effectively dealing

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with past and ongoing human rights abuses and preventing them in the future, as the principle of ‘never again’ in transitional justice is short-lived without grassroots campaigns, mobilisation and participation. This support could be reinforced by the integration of traditional justice mechanisms with the accountability and reconciliation processes as seen in section 2.7 of the TJPE (TJPE, 2024).

Ethiopia faces numerous challenges including poverty, unemployment and food insecurity, which should take precedence over transitional justice initiatives in the eyes of many Ethiopians. In the context of limited resources and competing priorities, investing in transitional justice mechanisms may not be regarded as a priority by the population at large. In general, aside from public awareness-raising by different actors, the practical legitimacy of the policy will shape the engagement of the public. The participation of the stakeholders, as mentioned in Part III of the policy, needs to be taken seriously to solicit public enthusiasm for the processes of transitional justice.

The TJPE’s approach to rebuilding social trust hinges on truth-seeking, public disclosure and reconciliation, allowing communities and individuals to address historical grievances and reintegrate socially. However, some critics argue that transitional justice frameworks often rely on ‘top-down’ processes, which may miss the nuanced dynamics of local communities and fail to engage them fully with the consequence of limiting the effectiveness of the social trust-building goal of transitional justice (Minow, 1998; Laplante and Theidon, 2007). Truth-telling processes can also be resource-intensive and without sustained engagement, they may appear superficial and lack a substantial impact on grievances and divisions (Hayner, 2001; ICTJ, 2009). In cases where victims participate in truth-telling without adequate psychological support, the process could even risk traumatising those it aims to support, potentially widening social divisions rather than healing them. For that reason, the implementation of the processes of truth-seeking and reconciliation of the TJPE in such a way that could garner public support calls for bottom-up community participation and resource mobilisation.

Furthermore, the engagement of the public in the implementation of the TJPE should be encouraged by attending to the public expectation of addressing fundamental causes of conflicts and meaningful reforms. The TJPE includes preventative measures to address and avoid future human rights abuses, such as institution-building and legal reform to reinforce human rights practices. Yet some argue that transitional justice processes do not fully address underlying

sociopolitical inequalities that often lead to human rights abuses (Galtung, 1969; ICTJ, 2009). Institutional reforms also require extensive resources and political commitment, which can be challenging to sustain in post-conflict settings, particularly given the potential resistance within entrenched security and judicial sectors (Roht-Arriaza and Mariezcurrena, 2006). Without addressing these systemic issues, there is a risk that transitional justice will fail to create sustainable peace, allowing conditions for future abuses to persist.

Reconciliation without justice

Reconciliation is vital to the peacebuilding ventures of the TJPE (Daniel, 2019). Retributive judicial proceedings, while essential, may not fully address the multilayered political and social complexities of past and ongoing human rights abuses. Legide (2022:1) puts forward that:

[S]eeking the retributive transitional justice measure in the absence of typical regime change and inter-elites bargain and in an ethnically polarized political transition exacerbate inter-elite discord, bolster ethnic-supported resistance from predecessor elites and harbour the risk of resurgence of new violence.

The effectiveness of reconciliation in mitigating sentiments of guilt and revenge is contingent on its integration with mechanisms of judicial accountability (Méndez, 1997; Teitel, 2000). Additionally, focusing on selective culpability could lead to perceived bias, particularly if lower-level offenders are seen as escaping justice, potentially causing grievances among victims and undermining the legitimacy of the process (Sriram, 2007; OHCHR, 2022).

In terms of design, the TJPE appears to aim at balancing judicial accountability with reconciliation by incorporating conditional amnesty for lesser offences while requiring accountability for grave crimes. Although conditional amnesty facilitates societal reintegration, scholars argue that it risks eroding the principle of legal responsibility by signalling that justice can be subject to political considerations (Scharf, 1999; Mallinder, 2007). In actual practice, conditional amnesty is illusory and, therefore, very challenging to implement fairly, especially for the victims who may perceive cooperation as an inadequate form of reparation for the harm caused to them. The resource demands of balancing judicial processes with amnesty and reconciliation could also stretch the available capacities and potentially compromise the whole process of transitional justice (Drumbl, 2007).

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Therefore, there is a possibility that the implementation of the amnesty and reconciliation processes of the TJPE could prioritise reconciliation and social harmony over accountability and justice. In Ethiopia, where there are reports, such as Amnesty International (2024), Human Rights Watch (2024a, 2024b) and OHCHR (2022), that many victims have suffered grave injustices in conflicts in which the government is one of the major actors, there could be a possibility that transitional justice mechanisms could be skewed to reconciliation rather than punishing perpetrators of atrocities in the government and among its opponents. The pressure to cease the instability and the threat of mutual accountability could spawn excessive levels of amnesty and indiscriminate application of peace over justice. Such an approach risks perpetuating a cycle of impunity, wherein unresolved grievances lead to renewed conflict and reinforce existing patterns of victimhood and retaliation. In the case of Ethiopia, the culture of impunity resonates deeply with violence (Awol, 2018). The ethnic dimensions of most of the conflicts in Ethiopia and their implications for deeper healing of the society should not be scapegoats to individual and group-level responsibilities before the court of law.

The significance of justice to Ethiopia's stability has been raised since the unfolding of political changes in 2019 (Amnesty International, 2019). The process of truth-finding and judicial accountability in the TJP of Ethiopia, thus, needs to be complete, robust and independent. At this point, the contributions of the Special Attorney and Bench that created the TJPE to indict and prosecute perpetrators and to bring about justice and peace hinge on its approach towards impunity. The definition of 'major perpetrator' in the TJPE underscores whose case engages the subject of impunity. The TJPE (Part II) defines 'major perpetrators' as those who plan, lead, coordinate and command acts of major human rights violations and atrocities and those who commit major human rights crimes through direct participation or omission of responsibility. Based on that and the extensive outlines of what constitute major human rights abuses in the same policy, the matter of accountability is at high stake. If the Special Attorney, under the auspices of the TJPE, effectively deals with this matter, the threat of impunity on peace will be contained. In that regard, the jurisdiction and capacity of the Special Attorney will be tested.

Furthermore, international and regional judicial cooperation is essential for prosecuting high-profile perpetrators, addressing cross-border accountability gaps

and ensuring justice for victims of transitional human rights abuses (IFIT, 2021; GCR2P, 2024a, 2024b). The reliance of the TJPE on extradition as a tool for holding foreign offenders accountable is limited because of Ethiopia's few extradition treaties. It is essential to expand international cooperation mechanisms, such as mutual legal assistance, to ensure culpability across borders. Strengthening these frameworks will enhance cross-border investigations, facilitate the prosecution of perpetrators and prevent impunity for serious crimes. Scholars argue that transitional justice frameworks are most effective when they blend domestic and international expertise (IFIT, 2021; Knight, 2024; GCR2P, 2024a, 2024b).

Ongoing conflicts


The TJPE faces the challenge of unstable political and social contexts. The ceasing of ongoing conflicts such as those in Amhara and Oromia and the consolidation of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostility Agreement (2022) are typical examples of instabilities on which the policy could thrive to restore peace. Profoundly speaking, stopping active conflicts and human rights abuses should be considered as part of transitional justice unless it would become self-defeating to its very purpose of making and building peace. In conflict-ridden environments, ensuring the security of victims and witnesses, conducting effective fact-finding missions and apprehending suspected perpetrators are not only improbable but often infeasible, as ongoing violence and instability obstruct justice processes at every level.

5. Conclusion

The 2024 TJPE holds promise as a tool for reconciliation and stability. Yet its success will depend on a range of critical factors, including genuine political will, broad inclusivity, a commitment from all stakeholders to meaningful dialogue and restorative efforts and an end to ongoing violence. For the TJPE, it must resist political instrumentalisation or capture, confront the root causes of conflict and promote both inclusive accountability and bottom-up reconciliation. Additionally, it must steadfastly respect the rights of victims and take into account the contextual realities of the country. In ethnically divided and polarised settings like Ethiopia, an overly retributive approach could risk transforming justice into a tool of reprisal or fostering selective victimhood, which could mobilise ethnic identities against responsibility and reconciliation efforts. Striking a careful balance between

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confronting impunity and fostering reconciliation is crucial to mitigate potentially destabilising factors of revenge and victimhood.

Reconciliation must not come at the expense of justice. The TJPE must harmonise the pursuit of social unity with a commitment to accountability for atrocities. Emphasising reconciliation without ensuring culpability could entrench a culture of impunity that has historically perpetuated cycles of violence. Balancing justice and reconciliation for lasting peace is the main yardstick to appraise the TJPE. 

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