The Implications of Ethiopian Exceptionalism for International Relations Theory: The Need for Alternative Perspectives

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Article Info

Abstract

International relations theory has been criticized for its lack of inclusivity and prejudice against Africa and non-Western nations in general. Given its non-colonial origin, notable aspects of its domestic environment, and dynamics of its external relations, Ethiopia is a unique state. Beyond mainstream theories, this exceptionalism also poses a challenge for alternative theories that intend to explain statehood and foreign policy in non-Western regions. Although International Relations literature that focuses on non-Western experiences and thoughts has recently expanded, Ethiopian exceptionalism has been overlooked. The majority of the existing studies on Ethiopian foreign policy also do not specifically state the theoretical approach they used, and those that do tend to rely on mainstream theories, primarily realism. Considering the limitations in the existing literature, this study aims to investigate the implications of Ethiopian exceptionalism for international relations theory. To achieve this objective, the study adopted a qualitative research method with an explanatory research design to identify saliences of Ethiopian statehood and shed light on why they challenge mainstream and alternative international relations theories. To this end, the study relied on secondary sources that are thematically organized and historically contextualized for content and discourse analysis. Among other things, the study identified the non-colonial origin of the state, sharply contested state identity, the disparity between domestic capacity and foreign influence, and location at ideological and geographical crossroads as main expressions of Ethiopian exceptionalism. The study concludes that Ethiopian exceptionalism is an ignored but valuable African and non-Western case that can enrich the quest for alternative interpretations in international relations theory.

Keywords*: Ethiopian exceptionalism, international relations theory, colonialism, foreign policy, Africa*

1. BACKGROUND

The modern history of Ethiopia began with Emperor Tewodros II (r. 1855-1868), who set in motion the pathway that ultimately led to the unification of the fragmented Ethiopian state, which had previously consisted of competing provinces. His successors, Emperor Yohannes IV (r. 1869-1889) and Menelik II (r. 1889-1913), overcame internal power struggles and defended against foreign threats while trying to build relationships with Europeans (Fentahun, 2025). Therefore, unlike the rest of Africa, the formation of the Ethiopian nation was primarily driven by internal factors, although external influences played a significant role in shaping this process and defining its boundaries. The existing literature on this period of Ethiopian history provides us with insights into both the core principles and notable aspects of the foreign policies of these three leaders—changes and continuities that were shaped by the domestic environment and external pressures. Both the domestic and foreign policy of Tewodros II were strongly influenced by his interest in modernization, which was mainly expressed in his pursuit of modern firearms that he sought to produce with support from the British Empire, the global power with which he expected to establish strong relations based on Christian solidarity (Appleyard & Pankhurst, 1987; Zewde, 2002).

Before he became king of kings, Tewodros II attacked Egyptian and Ottoman forces at Debarki in 1847 as part of his goal to expand his influence in the Western frontiers bordered by Sudan. However, equipped with less-advanced weapons, he was unable to break enemy defense lines and was forced to retreat. It is believed that this event shaped his interest in modern weapons, although he was unable to get the technical assistance he requested from the British Empire. Thus, modern firearms were crucial for Tewodros II to maintain control in the chaotic domestic power landscape and avert foreign threats. Consequently, he arrested British and other European nationals and forced them to produce the weapons. Already weakened by persistent internal campaigns, Tewodros II succumbed to the British expeditionary force at the battle of Makdala in 1968, where he opted to commit suicide rather than fall into the enemy's hands (Crummey, 1969; Zewde, 2002). Tewodros II is remembered as a modernizing and long-sighted patriot leader ahead of his time and an

exceptional warrior (Crummey, 1969; Henze, 2000; Pankhurst, 1987; Rubenson, 1966; Venkataram, 1973). While his regional foreign policy remained committed to averting Egyptian aggression that had historically been keen to control the source of the Blue Nile, religious solidarity was the foundation of his view towards Europe and global politics.

However, Tewodros II's domestic and foreign policies, which were belligerent but visionary, proved to be catastrophic, costing him his throne and life. However, he remains one of the most influential images, captivating both the public imagination and the interest of academia in modern Ethiopia (Crummey, 1971). As Clapham (2006) pointed out, Tewodros II boldly pursued the trend that made emulating foreign modernity a defining feature of Ethiopia's relations with foreigners, a policy that his successors implemented extensively. This trajectory that situates the quest for modern[1] statehood as central to the foreign relations agenda also continued after the fall of the monarchy, as development remained a major national priority. Yohannes IV followed a different policy domestically, respecting the hereditary power of provincial rulers; hence, unlike Tewodros II, he did not appoint his trustees as rulers. Religious homogeneity was pivotal in his state-building approach, which resulted in hostility against Muslims (Caulk, 1971). Yohannes IV's foreign policy was geared towards averting the foreign threats that worsened during his reign as the Italians encroached in the north through Massawa and the Egyptians and the Mahdists in the West. Like his predecessor, he died fighting foreign forces when he lost the war against Mahdists at the battle of Mattama in 1889 (Keller, 1987).

Menelik II succeeded in defending Ethiopia from colonialism after defeating the Italian invading forces at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. This came after consolidating his domestic base as his rivals surrendered one after the other, both by war and peace. His domestic hegemony, as well as a victory against Italy, resulted in the delimitation of the territory of modern Ethiopia and recognition as the only African independent state at the peak of European imperialism (Henze, 2000). Menelik II's foreign policy was characterized by an

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[1] The term "modern" is used in this study in relation to the state-building process in line with Weberian conception of a state that focuses on territorial integration, institutional building, bureaucratic centralization, and monopolization of the coercive means. For more, see: Weber, M. (1919/1946). *Politics as a Vocation*, in H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (Eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Oxford University Press.

elaborate and cautious foreign policy decision-making process involving his wife, Empress Taytu, and his companions, which constituted pragmatic and shrewd military, diplomatic, and trade relations with Europeans who had colonies encircling Ethiopia (Mekbib, 1978; Caulk, 1984). During the short reign of Lij Eyasu (1913-16), a venture to follow a deviant domestic religious policy that sought to change the centuries-old overarching role of the Orthodox Church as well as an inclination towards the Axis Powers of WWI (the First World War) against the European powers that had encircled Ethiopia were the two notable aspects in domestic and foreign policy areas, respectively (Ficquet & Smidt, 2014; Smidt, 2014). Ultimately, both internal and foreign forces that were antagonized by Lij Eyasu, the Church, and the Shawan nobility supported by the British and French governments, removed him from power and brought Queen Zewditu (r. 1916-30) and Ras Tafari as regent and heir to the throne (Ficquet & Smidt, 2014; Smidt, 2014).

After his throne was restored in 1941 after Italian occupation since 1936, Ras Tafari, who had been crowned Haile Selassie I in 1930, pursued diplomatic endeavors aimed at preserving independence in the face of renewed Italian aggression. He also played a crucial role in the African struggle against colonialism and continued to pursue regional and international diplomatic endeavors until his overthrow by revolution in 1974 (Asserate, 2015). Able to centralize power in his hands with domestic reforms, he leveraged Africa as a strategic asset of his foreign policy by the establishment of the continental organization, the OAU (Organization of African Unity), in 1963, a platform that served as a stepping stone for his global diplomacy (Yihun, 2012). After the restoration of his power at the end of the five years of Italian occupation (1936-41), he exploited the increasing global engagement of the USA (the United States of America) that was driven by the "Point Four" policy of President Truman (McVety, 2012: pp. 121-160). Although the relationship was first strongly sought after by Ethiopia to get rid of the British influence and acquire military, diplomatic, economic, and technical support, the USA also looked for Ethiopia's Red Sea strategic location and continental influence. Until the regime was removed from power by the 1974 revolution, reciprocal but asymmetrical relations with the USA was one of the major faces of Ethiopian foreign relations (Baissa, 1989; Lyons, 1986).

The military regime, the Derg, came to power following the fall of the centuries-old Solomonic dynasty in 1974, shifted Ethiopian foreign policy dependence from the USA to the Soviet Union, as the relationship with the former deteriorated because of the socialist ideological orientation of the government in the Cold War global order. During this period, in addition to economic and technical assistance, the military support from the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc states to the regime was critical to repelling the Somali invasion of 1977 and fighting armed groups (Tekle, 1989). After the insurgency that lasted 17 years, armed groups organized that fought to guarantee the self-determination of ethnic groups-controlled power under the umbrella of the EPRDF (the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front). Eritrea seceded from Ethiopia in 1993 following a referendum, and EPRDF adopted the self-proclaimed Revolutionary Democracy ideology and institutionalized ethnic-based politics by the 1995 Constitution. The regime established strong economic relations with China, resisted structural adjustment programs and other liberal impositions of the post-Cold War era, while keeping strong relations with the West as a counter-terrorism ally, leveraged regional governance under the IGAD (the Intergovernmental Authority on Development) and the African Union (AU), and was a key contributor to peacekeeping missions (Verhoeven & Gebregziabher, 2024).

Despite problematic relations with West as result of its resistance to implement Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPS) and accusations of authoritarian rule and violation of human rights, EPRDF achieved remarkable economic development under the paradigm of Developmental State masterminded by the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi who was also a leading figure in continental economic, environmental, and climate diplomacy (Labzaé & Planel, 2021). However, dissatisfaction with its authoritarian governance and other grievances triggered opposition from political forces mainly in Amhara and Oromia regions from 2015-18 that forced the regime to go through a change in leadership, thereby bringing Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power. Under the new leadership, EPRDF was rebranded PP (the Prosperity Party), which became one cause of the tension with the dominant party in the EPRDF coalition, TPLF (Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front). As part of comprehensive reform, the new leadership released political prisoners, introduced

liberal elements to the economy, welcomed oppositions and armed in exile, and took measures to improve administrative and institutional efficiency (Abdi, 2019; Temin & Badwaza, 2019).

However, the transition faced multiple challenges as Ethiopia is currently going through one of the worst civil wars in its history including the war in Northern Ethiopia mainly in Tigray region (2020-22), the ongoing wars in Amhara and Oromia regions and consequent national security challenges that have huge political, social, economic and foreign relation ramifications (Mengistu, 2024; Woldemariam, 2025). After strained relations with the West and international institutions dominated by Western them during the war in Northern Ethiopia, Ethiopia's partners have now softened their rhetoric against the government and resorted to pragmatic support (Caruso & Akamo, 2024). In addition to the foreign policy effect of the domestic instabilities mentioned above, the foreign policy of the current regime is also preoccupied with historical and locational legacies of Ethiopian state, including the quest to access the sea (Chanie, 2024; Tekuya, 2024), and the age-old Nile water tensions particularly the pressures on the construction of GERD (Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam) (Lindqvist, 2021; Verjee, 2021). Terror threats from Al-Shabab, the war in Sudan, and the increasing instability in the Red Sea and the Middle East, tensions with Eritrea also have significant implications for the current Ethiopian foreign policy (Mohammed, 2025). In the meantime, strong security relations are forged with non-traditional global and emerging powers that mainly include the UAE (United Arab Emirates) and Turkey (Fiseha, 2021; Verhoeven & Woldemariam, 2022).

Generally, the nexus between domestic and external domains of Ethiopia across the regimes highlighted above demonstrates that the Ethiopian experience allows reflections as part of non-Western state formation and building, as well as foreign policy dynamics. However, in the recently expanding literature that aims to incorporate non-Western experiences and thoughts in IR, including Acharya (2011), Acharya & Buzan (2009), Akgül (2021), Chatterjee (2014), Dunn & Shaw (2001), Eun (2018), Yoochul (2024), Hobson (2004), Shilliam (2010), ignored Ethiopian exceptionalism while incorporating other non-colonized states as case studies to demonstrate non-Western political thought

and state-building and formation trajectories. Moreover, the available studies on Ethiopian foreign policy, including Belay (2024), Dehez (2008), Gouriellec (2018), Maru (2017), Mesfin (2012), Mulugeta (2014), Sigatu (2024), Yigzaw & Mengisteab (2023), and Verhoeven & Gebregziabher (2024) employed mainstream international relations theories (IRTs), mainly realism, rather than engaging in alternative interpretations that recognize the salient features of the Ethiopian state and its foreign policy. Moreover, discussion on knowledge production in Ethiopian foreign policy has not started yet, although multidisciplinary and IR studies have recently become increasingly available. This study tries to contribute to this overlooked aspect of Ethiopian foreign policy studies by assessing the theoretical implications of the Ethiopian state's exceptional origin and the contemporary complexities.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

A qualitative research method was used in this study to achieve the objectives of investigating theoretical challenges in the study of Ethiopian foreign relations. To uncover why the Ethiopian exceptional features pose a challenge to mainstream IRT and require alternative perspectives, the study employed an explanatory research design. By using secondary sources, the study was able to gather information from a variety of social sciences, such as sociology, political science, history, and international relations (IR). Accordingly, the study relied on the literature that focuses on the Ethiopian political history of the state, domestic politics under different regimes and their foreign policy orientations, the influence of non-state actors, state-society relations, and the political biography of leaders to analyze how foreign policy orientation are shaped by domestic historical, socio-economic, political, and security developments. Moreover, the available literature that deals with the challenges of the non-Western regions and states to IRT is also thematically integrated to demonstrate the theoretical challenges Ethiopian exceptionalism entails. Previous studies on Ethiopian foreign policy, which mostly constitute journal articles and books, were also assessed to understand their explicit and implicit theoretical assumptions and show their limitations and accomplishments in capturing change and continuity in Ethiopian foreign policy. The study analyzed the above secondary data through content

and discourse analysis to uncover contestations in domestic politics, change and continuity in foreign policy trajectory, and salient features of Ethiopian statehood and foreign policy. Although the inclusion of primary data could have enriched the analysis of the study, the study is limited in this regard, as accessibility and other setbacks prevented the researcher from incorporating this set of data.

3. ETHIOPIAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND IRT

Mainstream IRT treats Africa as a continent that is not worthy of consideration. The salient domestic settings and foreign policy have paved the way for the sidelining of the content in the mainstream knowledge production landscape of IR (Cornelissen, 2012; Dunne, 2024; Gani & Marshall, 2022). For instance, in one of the dominant IRTs, realism, national interest, security concerns, and the power of states and threats that arise from the anarchic international system are major determinants of foreign policy behavior. From this perspective, African states are considered weak, tangential, and inconsequential (Raineri & Baldaro, 2023). Ignoring multiple sources of power and complex interactions of diverse actors, realism also concentrates on hard power, rendering it reductionist-state and security-centered (Halliday, 1996). Although these assumptions of realism make it unfit to address complex domestic and foreign relations challenges the African states are entangled with, it is the widely employed theory in the foreign policy study of African states (Brown, 2006). As it is mentioned in the first section of the study, there has been an increasing literature that aim at encountering the Western dominance in IRT thereby engaging in the exploration of non-Western thoughts and experiences that add multiplate in the understanding states and global politics (Acharya & Buzan, 2009; Akgül, 2021; Chatterjee 2014; Dunn & Shaw, 2001; Eun, 2018; Hobson, 2004; & Shilliam, 2010; Yoochul, 2024).

Tibebu (1996) observed that Ethiopia is presented in the Western available literature as an "anomaly" and "paradox" of Africa. Among several contradictory images of Ethiopia in Western scholarship are isolated, a land of devoted Christians that once had a great civilization, barbarian, non-colonized, and pan-Africanist. Ethiopia has a non-colonial origin and endured independence that made the quest for survival the core of its historical evolution (Keller, 1987). However, Ethiopian foreign policy study, like the rest of Africa,

is dominated by mainstream IRT, mainly realism and it is peripheral to the increasing non-Western-focused research theoretical investigation. Even by African benchmarks, Ethiopia poses a challenge to IRT given its non-colonial origin and the contradictions that refute most of the assumptions of mainstream and critical theories. Several studies have examined how Ethiopia's emergence as an independent state at the peak of colonization and its membership in the League of Nations (LN) exposed the racially hierarchical international system, thereby pioneering in challenging the concepts of statehood and the doctrine of sovereignty that expanded the international system following the emergence of post-colonial states (Allain, 2006; Donaldson, 2020; Jackson 1990). Getachew (2018) also explored how Ethiopian exceptionalism contributed to the non-Western alternative-world-making of black people who sought change in the global order.

There is also substantial literature that deals with the question of how the success in defying colonialism impacted Ethiopian foreign policy and its symbolic role in the struggle against colonialism, Pan-Africanism, regional and global diplomacy, and non-Western solidarity (Milkias & Metaferia, 2005; Yihun, 2012; Zewde, 2024). On the other hand, in Ethiopian foreign policy studies, realism is the most dominant theoretical approach, although a few earlier studies have also employed it in the study of the foreign policy of Ethiopian leaders. Mekbib (1972) and Abota (2002 are among the main theoretically informed studies that employed realism to investigate the foreign policies of Menelik II and Haile Selassie I, respectively. On the foreign relations of the Derg regime (1974-1991) also, the theoretical aspect of the available studies shows the prevalence of realism focusing on the Cold War contexts the military origin of the regime, the Ethio-Somalia War, and the domestic civil war have contributed to the studies that deal with this period being preoccupied with military and security agendas (Keller, 1985; Tekle, 1989, Toggia, 2012; Yihun, 2014). Some studies on this period underlined the prioritization of regime survival and national security concerns as more important foreign policy determinants than the convergence of ideological orientation. Yimer and Ensene (2022) demonstrated this by using the security alliance between Ethiopia and Kenya during the Cold War as a case study showing that

despite their different ideological orientations, the two regimes kept strong mutual relations.

Bayeh and Hussein (2025) and Yalew (2023) also argued that ideological allegiance was less important to the regime, as is evident in strained relations with China as a result of the latter's foreign policy alignment with the Soviet Union, shaped by the increasing military and other support it received. More than any other regime, the studies on the foreign policy of the EPRDF are highly realism-dominated, influenced by domestic and regional developments that concentrate on the use of force, regional rivalry, and influence to promote national interest. Ethiopia's role in the war against terrorism as an ally of the West, the 2006 military intervention in Somalia, the construction of the GERD (Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam), regional governance roles including its key role in the IGAD, peacemaking missions, and peacemaking roles in different conflicts have strongly affected the foreign policy landscape during this period (Belay, 2024; Dehez, 2008; Gouriellec, 2018; Maru, 2017; Mesfin, 2012; Mulugeta, 2014; Sigatu, 2024; Yigzaw & Mengisteab, 2023; Verhoeven & Gebregziabher, 2024). Some studies examine the Ethiopian foreign policy and global image from a constructivist perspective, including Gubena (2019) who assessed the "renaissance" as an ideational force behind domestic political and socio-economic change and a driver of foreign policy prioritization, and Yihun (2012) who emphasized how Ethiopia exploited its exceptional origin and non-colonial identity to dominate African politics.

Among the studies, that focus on constructivist perspective, while Zewde (2022) examined the symbolic role of Ethiopia as a black non-colonized state in shaping its foreign image as an ideational force for the fight against colonialism, neo-colonialism, and exploitation, Edao (2024) focused on the recent ideological and narrative shift under PP that reoriented Ethiopia's foreign policy from the track EPRDF followed. Generally, on the theoretical aspect of Ethiopian foreign policy studies, two points can be said here. First, although implicit theoretical assumptions can be inferred, most of the studies abstain from stating their theoretical framework explicitly. The fact that Ethiopian foreign policy is studied by scholars from other related disciplines might have contributed to the lack of attention

toward theoretical concerns. Second, in both the explicitly and implicitly theoretically sensitive studies, Ethiopian foreign policy is mainly investigated from the perspective of realism and, to some extent, constructivism and other multidisciplinary approaches. There is no question that the available literature gives us insights into the exceptionalism of Ethiopian statehood and foreign policy, although it did not address the challenges the Ethiopian exceptionalism poses in applying theoretical approaches.

This section of the study identified and analyzed four major expressions of Ethiopian exceptionalism: non-colonial state formation, contested state identity and the perils of ethnic-based politics, discrepancy between domestic capacity and foreign influence, and ideological and locational crossroads.

4.1. Non-Colonial State Formation

The scrambling of Africa that took place at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries determined the future of Africa by creating more than 50 post-colonial states that joined the international system in the post-WWII era (Mwombeki, 2024). Owing to this rapid and external state formation in Africa, the colonial perspective argues that the Africans had no agency in the formation of the states that crafted arbitrary borders that disregarded realities on the ground and became the cause of interstate contentions (Englebert, 1997; Magu, 2021). However, unlike the rest of Africa, state formation in Ethiopia was not externally imposed, as it was a domestically driven process that was completed with the advent of colonialism in the region. Thus, although agreements concluded with European powers to realize this cannot be regarded as treaties between equals, they brought the independent state into existence with expanded territory beyond the traditional domain of the Christian kingdom (Robso Wodajo, 2022). Moreover, Ethiopia is not free from the colonial legacy of borders in the Horn of Africa, as it has contested borders with most of its neighbors, mainly with Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea, causing not only skirmishes but also wars that are among the bloodiest in Africa (Tariku & Kefale, 2025; Yagya, 1990). The domestic agency played its role in initiating the state formation process that not only determined its territorial borders but also allowed domestic forces to shape their domestic realities.

The significant domestic role in the Ethiopian state formation process invalidates the application of the colonial perspective of state formation. However, it is with questioning about the role of the domestic sphere vis-à-vis the role of the foreign domain, including to what level the advent of colonialism affected Ethiopia's state formation and the extent of practical independence, especially during the first half of the 20th century. This takes us to the asymmetrical interplay between domestic and foreign agencies that unfavorably determined the fate of Ethiopian statehood, including the agreements that conceded critical national interests, including treaties on the Nile (Woldetsadik, 2014); the territorial demarcation that denied access to the sea (Farah, 1978); the five years of Italian occupation; and the role of Britain in ending the Italian occupation and its role in domestic affairs in the 1940s and early 1950s that some equate with treating Ethiopia as trusted territory or occupied enemy territory (Akalu, 2019; Swansinger, 1991).

As colonialism cannot explain state formation in Ethiopia, the domestically driven state formation also restricts us from applying neo-colonial critical theories that explain the interference and dependence of African states on their former colonizers. Neo-colonialism argues that, as Alemazung (2010) and Kalaska and Wites (2015) pointed out, former colonizing powers not only interfere in the internal affairs of post-colonial African states; they also determine their foreign policy direction, denying them the agency to act in line with their national interest. The economic (trade and loan), aid, military, security, and political dependence edicts dictate that the African states follow the suits of their former colonizers at international stages. Chidozie (2013) also observed that, especially in Francophone African states, the intervention is extensive as it involves pressure to sustain the language and cultural legacies of colonialism.

Although Ethiopia did not escape from the structural inequality and asymmetrical relations between Europe and Africa, the neo-colonial and neo-Marxist approaches like World System Theory and dependency perspectives cannot associate Ethiopian development challenges and foreign dependence with a colonial legacy. However, as the foreign policy of Ethiopia was a trajectory of dependence on one foreign power to another, these perspectives are insightful, although they cannot attach development predicaments and

other vices to a colonization legacy. Thus, investigations on Ethiopia's foreign policy are burdened to explain the complex agency interaction in a non-Western state formation and building process that took place at the peak of colonialism, shaped by urgency for modern statehood to address domestic challenges and ensure survival by averting foreign threats. In this trajectory, despite a non-colonial history, the dependency of consecutive Ethiopian regimes on foreign powers to the level that jeopardizes the extent of sovereignty exercised by the Ethiopian state also prompts us to ask what makes Ethiopia different from post-colonial Africa.

4.2. Contested State Identity and the Perils of Ethnic-Based Politics

Mainstream IRT considers states as actors that have a unified identity that they project towards other states and non-state actors in the international system. For instance, realism contends that the behavior of a state is immune from the influence of actors in its domain, and states are presumed only to respond to the external existential threat that comes from an anarchic international structure (Waltz, 1979). Constructivism also considers states to have a certain unified identity and value that shape the foreign policy objectives and orientation. It also considers the power and role of non-material and non-military sources of power. i.e., the role of social constructs in shaping the foreign policy of states, including ideas, values, norms, identity, and history (Wendt, 1999). Although constructivism is among mainstream IRTs that are worthy of consideration in Ethiopian foreign policy studies, given that Ethiopian state identity and history shaped its foreign image, applying constructivism's grand assumption of state identity has deficiencies in explaining the nexus between the highly fragmented domestic identity and the national identity project in foreign relations.

Despite its old roots and pioneering international statehood recognition in Africa, the question of identity in the Ethiopian state is complex even by post-colonial African states' measures. Within Ethiopia, identity is not only politicized but also oscillates between two extremes. On one hand, there is a grand 'Ethiopianist' identity narrative that rests on Abyssinian history, religion, cultural identity, system of government, and education. On

the other hand, there are ethno-nationalist identities that consider the grand narrative as imperialist, colonizer, and exploitative, thereby waging organized political movements, armed struggles, and foreign relations for ideational and material resources (Tibebu, 1995; Marzagora, 2017; Feyissa, 2023). Moreover, as Eurocentric modernity considers the non-Western experience as inferior, the grand Ethiopian narrative is ethnocentric, positioning the indigenous system at the center of world history (Giorgis, 2010; Mennasemay, 2010; Kebede, 2013; Feyissa, 2023). The more profound interpretation of this narrative is propagated by Kebede (1999; 2013), who argued that Ethiopians have a distinct understanding of time and modernization thought and experience that is fundamentally different from the Western linear or progressive interpretation of history and modernity.

Thus, this perspective considers the formation of the modern Ethiopian state and the institutionalization of the European state model, including the legal system, coercive apparatus, education, and the abolition of the monarchy as a self-imposed colonialism (Menassemay, 1997; Kebede, 1999; Kebede, 1999; Woldeyes, 2017). In sharp contrast to the grand narrative, competing interpretations of identity proliferated and started to dominate Ethiopian politics in the 1970s. These ethnic-nationalist movements pursued the right to self-determination of ethnic groups that constitute the Ethiopian state in a quest for change interwoven with Marxist-Leninist interpretation and ideological fervor (Kleppe, 2022). These political movements that began with students of the Haile Selassie I University shifted to armed struggles in the late 1970s, consequently toppling the military regime by ethnic liberation fronts under the umbrella of the EPRDF. The regime institutionalized ethnic-based politics, and the federal state structure and ethno-national identity came to the forefront as a foundation of the system of governance and political organization (Young, 1996).

The radical provision of the FDRE Constitution, under "the right to self-determination of nations, nationalities, and peoples" of Article 36, not only allows self-administration across ethnic lines but also secession from the Ethiopian state. This provision that lays down the ground for the dissolution of the state contradicts the survival instinct that states pursue as the most sacred objective (Hamza, 2021). Although Ethiopian history is a history of wars,

contemporary conflicts are identity-based wars waged against the central government by different identity-based armed struggles that seek to liberate their respective ethnic groups. The armed insurgency OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) that went on for over a century and the recently erupted militarized Amhara ethno-nationalism by Fanno are fighting in the two major regions of Ethiopia. The Pretoria peace agreements that ended the war in northern Ethiopia seem fragile as tensions continue between the federal government and the TPLF. Moreover, the ONLF (Ogaden National Liberation Front) is also warning of returning to armed insurgency as a result of its discontent towards the federal government and the Ethiopian Somali regional administration.

Ethiopia's sharply contradicting identity interpretations that are politicized and militarized pose a challenge for anyone who tries to present the state identity as a united foreign image, as constituents of the domestic reality compete not only to influence national foreign policy, they also to establish their foreign relations. As Halliday (1987) observed, states like Ethiopia face the challenge of fragmented foreign relations as both the state and forces within it look at the foreign space as a source of opportunities and resources. This is true in Ethiopia not only in terms of the presence of varying non-state forces that influence foreign directives, the centrifugal effects of the ethnic-based state structure (Gelaneh, 2025) and the militarization of ethno-national political movements that embrace and reject the Ethiopian statehood (Gelaneh, 2025), add to complexity the role of identity in domestic politics and the possibility of directing united foreign policy. Despite the availability of investigations of the grand identity narrative from the arts, modernity, history, and sociological perspectives, the trajectory of social and military forces shaping in foreign policy realm defies the united national identity constructivists assume. On the other hand, ethno-nationalist movements that have been hugely shaping Ethiopia's politics since the second half of the 20th century have effectively prevented the state from monopolizing coercive force, invalidating the widely embedded assumption in most mainstream IRTs. Thus, Ethiopian foreign policy studies may take the two lines of identity interpretations and examine their theoretical ramifications.

4.3. Discrepancy between Domestic Capacity and Foreign Influence

Mainstream IRTs acknowledge the two-way interaction and influence between domestic and foreign spheres and presuppose the foreign policy of states to be a reflection of their domestic context. Although realism does not consider domestic politics as a determinant of foreign policy behavior, it underlines the necessity of boosting domestic capacities and creating allies to ensure existence in the anarchic international system. At the same time, it presumes the projection of a sustained, predictable foreign policy as it considers the state as immune from the influence of non-state actors (Waltz, 1979). On the other hand, liberalism argues that state institutions and the interests of non-state actors determine the trajectory of foreign policy in a certain state. Moreover, liberalism assumes that institutionalized governance fosters stable governance domestically and cooperation in the external domain (Moravcsik, 1997). On the other hand, constructivism, as Wendt (1999) pointed out, emphasizes the role of ideational forces and values, including identity and narratives, and gives agency for domestic factors to determine the foreign policy preferences of states. Much of Ethiopian foreign policy behavior defies the assumptions of the mainstream IR theories highlighted above.

Ethiopia has been among the poorest states in the World, consistently affected by civil wars, famine, and political instabilities. Despite the restricted domestic economic and military capacities, Ethiopian regimes have dedicated increasing resources to achieving foreign policy objectives and have projected a foreign image of a strong actor. As Clapham (1972) and Aalen (2017) pointed out, Ethiopia has been a key actor in the region, supporting armed groups against antagonistic governments, which contradicts its limited resources. The history of Ethiopia is full of wars, both domestically and against neighbors, and it has had border contentions and foreign invaders. Observing this, one may expect its adverse impact on strengthening national military power that can be employed to ensure the survival of the states. The anarchic nature of global politics has been foreseen as a primary determinant of states' foreign policy behaviors that focus on accumulating power as a means of survival. This particularly works for Ethiopia as it is located in the volatile Horn of Africa region. However, despite the domestic weakness pointed out above,

Ethiopia has been a formidable military power in the Horn and Africa. Despite the decades-long domestic civil wars, it was able to defend its territorial integrity by defeating Somalia and Eritrea, for example. In addition to using its military for national survival, it has been a strong regional power in the fight against terrorism, as it is evident in the 2006 ousting of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in Somalia and the fight against Al-Shabab. These foreign policy influences are neither driven by ideational sources of power, as constructivists argue, nor by institutional governance, as liberals argue. Rather, they involved the use of coercive means for national security and regional security governance, both of which form the promotion of national interest by force.

The use of hard power to preserve national integrity and to project foreign influence while domestically being constrained by serious weaknesses is a contradiction that defies the core assumption of realism. However, defying the domestic impairments, Ethiopian foreign influence in the region has been crucial. As Dehez (2008) and Gouriellec (2018) noted, Ethiopia played a role that can be equated as hegemony in different interstate agendas in the Horn, including in diplomacy and security governance areas, especially as it was evident under the EPRDF regime. Moreover, it has been a key actor in the fight against terrorism as a partner of the USA and the West in general, contributed exceptionally to peacekeeping missions and peacemaking efforts, and dominated regional governance under IGAD and had shaped agendas in the AU and at global level (Dehez, 2008; Mesfin, 2012; Maru, 2017). On the other hand, as it is illustrated in the previous subsection, the Ethiopian political landscape is highly fragmented and polarized, shaped by ethic-based politics and the militarization of major ethno-national questions in the country. While the domestic reality of identity in politics is this, the foreign image projected by Ethiopia, particularly at the continental level, has been a symbol of diplomatic strength, continental and non-Western solidarity.

On the other hand, constructivism assumes the state to follow a predictable foreign policy directive in line with its identity and values. However, Ethiopian foreign policy behavior in this regard is full of abrupt changes as a result of changes in the domestic and foreign environment. The foreign policy changes across regimes and leaders, highlighted in the

background section, prove this fact. While some of the shifts in foreign policy have been pragmatic moves to promote foreign relations gains in the changing global environment, as was evident in the turning of Derg to the Soviet Union and the strong relationship of EPRDF with China, other changes arise from a lack of domestic institutionalized and stable governance. Predictable foreign policy behavior constrained by limited and institutionalized is also what liberals presume as a major determinant of states' behavior in the international system. The Ethiopian domestic landscape has been adversely affected by deficiencies in peaceful political opposition and transition, thereby fostering personalized governance as opposed to an institutionalized one. But, Ethiopia has been an active player in the emergence and evolution of regional and global institutional governance, and a partner of the West as an anchor state in the Horn and Africa. Moreover, state institutions go through abrupt changes with changes in regimes and leaders, thereby impacting the development of mechanisms that sustain foreign policy in the long term.

The abolition of the Ethiopian national army under the Derg following the coming to power of the EPRDF, absence of a clear distinction between party, government, and the state, and shifts in institutional norms as new regimes engage in instilling new ideologies and governance systems can be mentioned as manifestations of institutionalized governance which in turn challenge the application of liberalism in studying Ethiopian foreign policy. Although some of the discrepancies between domestic affairs and foreign relations character may be evident in other states, what makes Ethiopia's case unique is the extent to which those aspects are polarized. The discussion in this sub-section illustrated that Ethiopia is a poor but strong military power in the region, unstable internally but a peacemaker externally, internally fragmented identity but influential foreign image, and weak domestic institutional governance but a vital actor in international and regional institutions. In short, the discrepancy is Ethiopia's domestic setting and its foreign image, which is the internally troubled political landscape as opposed to the projection of stability and strong statehood in its foreign policy. Thus, the studies on Ethiopian foreign policy that employ mainstream IRT, including realism, liberalism and constructivism, face the

challenge of explaining the missed link between highly contrasting domestic and foreign settings.

4.4. Ideological and Locational Crossroads

Ethiopia's location in the Horn of Africa, adjacent to the Red Sea, has been pivotal in determining the state formation process and contemporary domestic politics and foreign affairs. Its proximity to the Middle East has placed it at a cultural and religious juncture between Africa and the Middle East. Christianity entered Ethiopia in the 4th century and Islam in the 7th century at the time of Prophet Mohammed, making the country embrace the two major religions early (Erlich, 2023). The question of how religion influences the foreign policy of states is well researched from constructivist perspectives, as religion shapes identities, values, and ideas that in turn influence the foreign policy preferences of a state (Jelen, 1994; Warner & Walker, 2011; Sandal, 2023). Ethiopia is both a Christian and a Muslim state in which the followers of both religions compete to influence state identity, politics, and foreign policy direction. As Hussien (1997) and Ostebo (2020) pointed out, the Ethiopian foreign image has been depicted as an "island of Christianity," ignoring the influence of Islam both domestically and in foreign relations. Thus, constructivist interpretations that focus on religion as a factor affecting Ethiopia's foreign relations need to reconsider this divide.

Back to Ethiopia's geographic location, in the immediate years of the post-WWII era, the strategies and policies of the USA and Europe considered Ethiopia as part of the Middle East, thereby facilitating the close relations formed between the two states (Davison, 1959). The Ethiopian relationship is both an old and a complex one, given its geographical proximity, which affected not only religion but also political dimensions. The Ethiopian ruling class of the Solomonic Dynasty, that ruled Ethiopian until 1974 with some interruptions, traced its origin to the Middle East based on the legend that the dynasty's first ruler, Menelik I, was a son of King Solomon of Israel and Queen Sheba of Ethiopia, conceived during the latter's visit to Jerusalem (Piovanelli, 2013). This non-African claim of origin sharply contrasts with the Ethiopian black and African image that has been a

symbolic force in the struggle against colonialism, the formation of the OAU, Pan-Africanism, and Black solidarity (Jalata, 2009).

Ideologically, Ethiopia under EPRDF rule was positioned at the intersection of the West and the East. Despite its Marxist-Leninist origin, it acquired the support of the USA during the armed insurgency against the socialist military regimes (Ottaway, 1995). However, its resistance to the post-Cold War international neoliberal policies under the SAPs (Strategic Adjustment Programs) put Ethiopia at odds with the West and international financial institutions. The EPRDF continued its allegiance to Marxist-Leninist ideology under Revolutionary Democracy that made it 'the last socialist regime in the world' (Abebe, 2016). The EPRDF also established strategic partnerships with China, mainly in the economic sector (Hess et al., 2015). After the 2002 election crisis, the government officially adopted the developmental state-building paradigm and narrative modeled on the economic growth achieved by the Asian tigers (Labzae & Planel, 2021). In his unfinished dissertation, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi argued that the possibility of neoliberalism breaking the vicious poverty cycle in Africa is zero.

However, as Feyissa (2011) noted, Westerners and global institutions dominated by them eased their normative approach and engaged with the regime pragmatically, acknowledging its economic development, security, counterterrorism, regional governance development assistance, and foreign aid. Generally, Ethiopia is located at geographical, cultural, religious, and ideological junctures that make it difficult to define its foreign policy with a single factor. Combined with other peculiarities, the fact that Ethiopia is positioned at these crossroads adds to the need for a theoretical perspective that appreciates the role of variance in foreign and domestic features.

5. CONCLUSION

The application of theoretical perspectives in IR not only provides deep insights into academic endeavors it also offers input for foreign policy decision-making. This fact underlines the need for theoretical debate in Ethiopian foreign policy studies, which this study was intended to contribute to. The exceptional origin and the complex route of the

Ethiopian statehood and foreign policy are going through underscore the need for uncovering their theoretical ramifications. However, the available literature has a serious gap in this regard, as the non-Western theoretical research agenda in IR has ignored the Ethiopian experience, and Ethiopian foreign policy studies either fail to explicitly state their theoretical perspectives or, if they do, they largely rely on mainstream IRTs. Moreover, although the implications of Ethiopian exceptionalism have been investigated from multiple social science perspectives, its implications for IR and foreign policy knowledge production have not yet been explored. This study has tried to show that the Ethiopian experience is a valuable case that can contribute to the diversification of perspectives as part of challenging the dominance of the West in IRT. On the other hand, in specific foreign policy studies, although Ethiopian exceptionalism poses a challenge for the application of mainstream IRTs, this study demonstrated that theory-informed investigations allow for the exploitation of the opportunities it offers and acknowledge the limitations.

This study identified major expressions of Ethiopian statehood, focusing on historical and contemporary factors and incorporating both domestic and foreign affairs. Among other things, the study outlined the non-colonial origin of the state, sharply contested state identity, the disparity between domestic capacity and foreign influence, and location at ideological and geographical crossroads as main expressions of Ethiopian exceptionalism. More than any other, the non-colonial origin has huge repercussions for the agent structure of state formation, which in turn invalidates perspectives founded on colonial explanations of state formation in Africa. However, development challenges and foreign dependence, similar to other African states, despite Ethiopia's non-colonial history, make the application of post-colonial Marxist perspectives like World System Theory and Dependency Theory relevant, although one cannot justify Ethiopia's development predicaments and foreign dependence to a single former colonizer. On the other hand, the domestic setting of the state, which was initially determined largely by the domestic agency, exhibits a huge complexity even by the benchmarks of states directly formed by colonialism. Domestic identity politics that contested the state identity in the eyes of ethno-

national movements, some of which waged armed struggles that spanned more than half a century, hindered the construction of a united state identity dispersed the possibility of directing united foreign influence. This fragmented and polarized identity interpretation, accompanied by weak institutional and normative governance, challenges the application of mainstream theories of constructivism and liberalism.

On the other hand, despite the extensive application of realism in Ethiopian foreign policy studies, the discrepancy between domestic and foreign domains makes the application of such grand narratives unfit for a deep understanding of the Ethiopian context. Even within the fragmented setting and contrary to the domestic challenges that the Ethiopian statehood has been facing, a powerful foreign policy influence has been projected owing to its critical role in regional governance, role in multi-governmental organizations, peacemaking and diplomatic engagements, peacekeeping missions, and counter-terrorism agendas. However, as it is mentioned above, the terrain of the domestic realm has been characterized by poverty, civil war, famine, and instability, which has ravaged Ethiopia throughout the 20th century and contemporarily. These contradictory features not only defy realist assumptions on the source of material power, they also contradict the liberal notion that claims domestic institutional and normative governance as a determinant of foreign policy behavior. Beyond applying realist approaches that depict Ethiopia as a power player or the failed, weak, and fragile state paradigms of Western scholarship, Ethiopian foreign policy shall interrogate the theoretical challenges the implications of these incongruent traits and direct them against the generalized and rule-like assumptions of mainstream IRTs. Thus, Ethiopian foreign policy studies should confront theoretical challenges of acknowledging Ethiopian exceptionalism in applying theoretical perspectives and push for the incorporation of the Ethiopian experience in the recently growing IR literature that focuses on non-Western experience and thoughts.

Ethical Approval

Not applicable. This study did not involve human or animal participants. The data used are secondary and publicly accessible.

Conflict of Interest

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