

# From the Social Contract to the Gospel Covenant: Eschatology and the Rebirth of Prophetic Politics in Ethiopia

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**Abstract:** This article argues that contemporary Ethiopia is witnessing a fundamental transformation of its political foundation, moving from a secular social contract toward a sacralized Gospel covenant. It critiques the emergence of an “eschatological statecraft” under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, wherein the regime strategically mobilizes Pentecostal-Charismatic theological concepts - particularly prophetic destiny and redemptive suffering - as a core technology of governance. Employing a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study systematically examines a corpus of 47 political speeches, policy documents, media broadcasts, and visual propaganda materials from 2018 to 2024. The analysis reveals how the regime constructs a narrative framing the Prime Minister as a divinely chosen leader told by his mother at his age of seven, his rule a preordained chapter in a national divine plan. Within this paradigm, crises such as war, economic collapse, and social fragmentation are narrated not as governance failures but as divinely permitted trials necessary for national purification. Concurrently, the state’s developmental rhetoric employs a potent eschatology of suffering, urging the present generation to embrace sacrifice as a civic duty for a future prosperity that only their children will witness. Drawing on political theology and postcolonial theory, this paper analyzes how this discursive fusion constructs a moralized political order that sanctifies authority while systematically depoliticizing accountability. The article concludes that this rebirth of prophetic politics fundamentally subverts democratic responsibility, replacing it with a logic of divine determinism that forecloses the space for critical citizenship, pluralistic dialogue, and institutional oversight, thereby entrenching a form of authoritarianism under the guise of a spiritual mission.

**Keywords:** eschatology, political theology, prophetic politics, social contract, gospel covenant, Ethiopia

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## Introduction

In the contemporary polity of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), the interplay between religion, statecraft, and governance has assumed renewed and critical importance. While scholarly and policy commentary often focuses on the intricacies of ethnic federalism, institutional fragility, and overt conflict, a significant and under-explored dimension is the manner in which eschatological imaginaries - comprising potent narratives of redemption, suffering, predestination, and divine authority - are being mobilized as sophisticated political technologies. This article advances the argument that the current Ethiopian government is operating not merely as a secular political actor but is increasingly framing itself as an agent of a providential mission, one that is deeply rooted in a theological-political vision of state and national destiny. In so doing, the state consciously constructs a form of “eschatological governance” wherein crises are strategically recast as divine ordinations, political authority is sacralized, and accountability is deftly diverted from human institutions to higher, transcendental mechanisms (Girma 2018; Teklu 2013, Dejen, 2018).

Eschatology, at its core, involves doctrines and beliefs concerning “last things” - encompassing ultimate purpose, final judgment, redemption, and the fulfillment of history. When these theological concepts are transferred into the realm of political practice, they become powerful instruments through which the state crafts its legitimacy. Within such a framework, authority is no longer derived solely from legal-rational or popular sources but becomes fundamentally sacred. This sacralization of power becomes particularly evident when political leadership is framed as divinely chosen, or when collective suffering and national crisis are depicted as preordained tests that must be endured for the sake of a future deliverance. Such discursive frames serve to elevate the ruler beyond the ordinary realm of political contestation and render dissent not merely a policy disagreement but a moral or spiritual transgression (Agamben 2011; Weber 1978).

In the Ethiopian context, this dynamic is layered upon a long and complex tradition of religious-political thought. As Girma (2018) observes, “Ethiopia is an old society often confronted with new ideas... social changes and modernization were important contentious points especially... where the church and the state were accustomed to seeing themselves as two sides of the same coin” (7). The historical fusion of spiritual and temporal authority has significant precedents; the role of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) in legitimizing imperial power, especially under Menelik II and his successors, has been well documented in studies of religious-martial statecraft (Kaplan 2004; Bahru 2014; World Council of Churches, 2021). What is novel in the contemporary period, however, is the specific articulation of this paradigm: a government that increasingly relies on a modernized prophetic language, narratives of sacrifice for a future era, and the explicit portrayal of present suffering as inherently redemptive.

This article contends that the current regime's discourse functions through three interlocking registers: first, the presentation of authority as divinely destined; second, the narration of crisis as divinely allowed and temporally bounded; and third, the framing of sacrifice as a civic virtue that points toward a future generation's deliverance. A prime example is the government's repeated insistence, articulated in at least 23 major speeches between 2018 and 2024, that the present generation must endure hardship and that the fruits of national development will accrue only to the next generation (World Council of Churches, 2021; Office of the Prime Minister, 2020; Ministry of Finance. (2023)). Within this interpretive frame, the ongoing crisis is not understood as the result of governance failure or policy mismanagement but is re-signified as a necessary phase within a larger, divine narrative. This logic effectively excuses the deferment of accountability and the postponement of demands for basic services, rights, and political freedoms (Regassa & Emmenegger, 2023; Abbink 2020).

The analytic lens of political theology provides a particularly helpful framework for understanding these dynamics. Works such as Teklu's *The Politics of Metanoia: Towards a Post-Nationalistic Political Theology in Ethiopia* (2013) explores how theological concepts mediate political identity in Ethiopia and how ecclesial public theology intersects with ethno-national logic. Similarly, recent scholarship on the politics of secularism in Ethiopia demonstrates that the state does not maintain a strict separation from religious institutions; rather, religion is often co-opted, and the public theology of the church becomes enmeshed with state objectives (Befekadu 2022). By embedding eschatological narratives directly into the project of governance, the state advances a moralized political order in which critique is framed as a betrayal of a national-divine purpose rather than a legitimate form of civic engagement.

The consequences of such an eschatological orientation are manifold and profound. First, it fundamentally transforms the social contract: instead of a compact between citizens and institutions grounded in mutual accountability, rights, and public reason, it becomes a covenant of sacrifice in which the citizen's primary role is to endure and trust in a future deliverance (Mbembe 2001). Second, the sacralization of leadership and the concomitant framing of dissent as heresy actively undermine pluralistic deliberation, civic contestation, and institutional oversight (Záhořík 2021). Third, by assigning sovereign responsibility to a transcendent will, the government deflects human accountability; failures in service provision, developmental delays, mass displacement, and violent conflict are not framed as policy deficits but as providential occurrences. This rhetorical strategy thus acts as a powerful shield for tangible governance deficiencies (Araya 2018).

Empirically, Ethiopia's post-2018 context offers fertile ground for this analysis. Between 2018 and 2024, the state's trajectory has been marked by ambitious promises of rapid transformation, severe conflict resulting in an estimated 600,000 civilian casualties in the Tigray war alone (Gettleman 2023), and large-scale displacement affecting over 4.5 million people (UN OCHA 2023). Yet official narratives have

consistently emphasized sacrifice, destiny, and future prosperity. The regime's discourse around development, as documented in 15 major policy speeches analyzed for this study, emphasizes a generational transition, encapsulated in the mantra: "this generation must suffer; the next generation will harvest." In the realm of political governance, accountability mechanisms remain notably weak. As Araya (2018) argues, "there is a constitutional framework of control and accountability, but there is no political control mechanism in place, and no accountability measures have been taken" (214). This significant gap between constitutional promise and political practice provides a structural opening for eschatological narratives to fill the ensuing legitimacy void.

Theoretically, this article draws on three core strands of scholarship. First, it engages with political theology--specifically the notions of sacralized authority, divine right, and messianic leadership (Agamben 2011; Schmitt 2005). Second, it utilizes postcolonial theory, which elucidates the ways in which modern states in Africa often deploy meta-narratives of redemption, progress, and suffering to mend chronic legitimacy deficits (Mbembe 2001). Third, it incorporates insights from comparative governance, examining how developmental states, especially those under acute stress, frequently resort to ideological frames that emphasize mission and destiny rather than institutional accountability (Abbink 2020; Clapham 2023). Together, these theoretical lenses allow us to understand "eschatological governance" as a meaningful and distinct category of analysis: a mode of governance that strategically combines sacred imaginaries with state practice, thereby recalibrating the very logic of power, crisis, and accountability.

The article will proceed as follows: Section 2 presents the methodology, detailing the empirical corpus, analytical framework, and procedures. Section 3 maps the ideological discourse of the regime through systematic analysis of primary texts. Section 4 examines how this discourse translates into institutional practices and governance strategies. Section 5 reflects critically on the implications for democratic pluralism, accountability, and human rights, while explicitly considering alternative explanatory frameworks. The concluding section suggests potential pathways for reclaiming a democratic political imagination in Ethiopia - one grounded not in destiny or providence, but in the secular principles of rights, justice, and citizen deliberation.

By foregrounding the theological-political dimension of Ethiopia's governance, this article offers a novel and critical perspective. It posits that the present crisis cannot be understood solely through the lenses of ethnic conflict or institutional failure. Rather, it must also be seen as a pivotal moment within a larger, state-sponsored narrative of salvation, sacrifice, and future promise. Understanding this underlying logic is essential to explaining why governance deficits persist with such tenacity and why citizens often find themselves waiting for a transcendent deliverance rather than actively demanding earthly accountability. To respond effectively to Ethiopia's

challenges, civil society, scholars, and policy-makers must engage directly with the eschatological dimension of power, rather than focusing solely on its institutional symptoms.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically drawing on the approaches of Norman Fairclough (1995, 2003) and the broader tradition of critical theory. The primary objective is not to generate empirical generalizations but to engage in a deep, critical, and interpretative examination of how political power, ideology, and religious discourse are interwoven to produce and sustain a specific form of legitimacy in contemporary Ethiopia. As a critical paper, it seeks to uncover the hidden ideological functions of language and to reveal how this “eschatological governance” shapes social relations, obscures accountability, and constrains democratic possibilities.

This research is situated within an interpretive-constructivist paradigm, which posits that social and political realities are not objective facts waiting to be discovered, but are constructed through language, discourse, and shared meanings. It is further guided by a critical social theory stance, which aims to move beyond mere interpretation to critique power structures and ideologies that perpetuate domination and injustice. This paradigm is ideally suited for analyzing how the Ethiopian regime constructs a “reality” where its authority is divinely ordained, and its failures are re-signified as sacred trials.

### *Corpus Construction and Sampling*

Given the discursive nature of the research problem, data was collected from a wide range of textual and multimodal sources to build a comprehensive and robust corpus spanning the period from April 2018 (the assumption of office by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed) to June 2024. This temporal scope captures the entirety of the current administration’s tenure and allows for analysis of discursive evolution over time. The corpus comprises 47 primary sources, selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance, authoritativeness, and representativeness of state discourse. The corpus includes: *Primary Official Texts*: political speeches (n=18): All major nationally televised addresses by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, including: Inaugural Address (April 2018); State of Emergency addresses (February 2021, November 2021); Victory Day speeches (2022, 2023); New Year addresses (2019-2023); and addresses to Parliament on budget proposals and policy frameworks. These were sourced from the Office of the Prime Minister’s official website and the national broadcaster (EBC); *The Medemer Philosophy* (n=3): Abiy Ahmed’s (2019) *Medemer: The Ethiopian*

*Century*; the Prosperity Party's (2021) *Manifesto and Program Document*; and the 2022 *Medemer: A Path to Prosperity* policy implementation document, and *Policy Documents* ( $n=8$ ): Key national policy frameworks including the 2021-2030 National Development Plan; the 2022 National Dialogue proclamation; and five major sectoral policy documents (agriculture, education, peace-building, youth employment, and investment). Secondary Discourse analysis includes: State-Aligned Media ( $n=12$ ): A systematic sample of 12 broadcasts from the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) and Fana Broadcasting Corporate (FBC) featuring news analysis, political commentary, and coverage of national events. Selection was stratified to include coverage of major crises (war, displacement) and developmental announcements, and Visual Propaganda Materials ( $n=6$ ): Official posters, billboards, and social media content (from the Prime Minister's official Facebook and X/Twitter accounts) featuring religious iconography and prophetic messaging. Finally, contextual and corroborating sources includes survey data: The Ethiopian Policy Research Institute's (2023) National Public Opinion Survey Report ( $N=100$  respondents), and relevant academic literature.

This corpus allows for triangulation, ensuring that the emerging discourse is not isolated to a single medium but represents a coherent, cross-platform ideological formation. All Amharic-language sources were translated by the author, a native Amharic speaker, with translations verified by a second researcher for accuracy.

### *Analytical Framework*

The data analysis follows Norman Fairclough's (1995, 2003) three-dimensional framework for CDA, which enables systematic examination of discourse at multiple levels: textual analysis, discursive practice and social practice. The analysis proceeded through the following steps: corpus familiarization (all texts were read multiple times to gain comprehensive familiarity), systematic coding (texts were coded using both deductive codes (derived from theory: e.g., "sacralization," "prophetic leadership") and inductive codes (emerging from data: e.g., "generational covenant," "redemptive suffering"). Coding was conducted manually using a structured coding framework), pattern identification (recurrent themes, metaphors, and rhetorical strategies were identified across the corpus), discourse tracing (the evolution of key narratives was traced chronologically to identify shifts and intensifications), triangulation (findings were cross-referenced with survey data and academic literature to validate interpretations), and negative case analysis (texts that appeared to contradict the dominant discourse were examined to test and refine the analysis).

As such, this study has limitations. As a critical study, this research is inherently normative and does not claim neutrality. Its ethical commitment is to expose structures of power that undermine democratic accountability and human rights. The

researcher's positionality is that of a critical scholar operating within the traditions of political theology and postcolonial theory, committed to rigorous textual analysis and theoretical reasoning. The analysis is limited to publicly available texts and does not include ethnographic observation or interviews with discourse producers or consumers, which could provide additional insights into the production and reception of eschatological narratives. All sources are cited meticulously to ensure academic integrity and transparency.

## Discussion

The power of a ruling regime is sustained not only through the coercive apparatus of the state but, perhaps more profoundly, through the discursive frameworks it constructs to render its authority legitimate, inevitable, and morally unassailable. In the context of contemporary Ethiopia, an emergent and potent ideological formation can be located in what this article terms *eschatological governance*. This is a distinct mode of conceptualizing the political order wherein narratives of divine election, predestined suffering, prophetic leadership, and future deliverance are systematically mobilized to sustain legitimacy, discipline dissent, and fundamentally reshape citizen expectations. This section dissects the ideological architecture of this discourse, examining its three interlocking pillars: the sacralization of authority, the reframing of crisis as divinely ordained, and the valorization of sacrifice as a civic virtue.

### *The Sacralization of Authority and the Myth of the Divine-Destined Leader*

At the heart of eschatological governance lies a foundational belief that political leadership transcends the mundane realm of electoral politics and bureaucratic administration to become a locus of transcendence. The leader is cast not as a public servant chosen through a social contract, but as a *chosen one* - an individual whose ascendancy was foretold and whose mandate is derived from providence itself. In Ethiopia's contemporary context, this ideological maneuver is vividly illustrated in the curated narrative surrounding Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. The repeated invocation of his mother's prophecy - that he would become the "seventh king of Ethiopia" - is not merely a personal anecdote but a deliberate charismatic claim to legitimacy (Weber 1978). This narrative, prominently featured in his political autobiography *Medemer* (2019), positions him as a vessel of divine purpose, asserting that "our mission is God's calling" (47). This framing effectively transplants the leader from the plane of conventional political accountability to the sanctified domain of a divine plan.

The historical context of church-state entanglements in Ethiopia provides a fertile seedbed for this sacralization. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC)

has historically held a privileged constitutional persona, often operating as the spiritual counterpart to the state's temporal authority (Rift Valley Institute 2023). This legacy enables the current regime to draw upon a deep cultural reservoir of religious legitimacy, even while professing modern, secular credentials. What distinguishes the present moment, however, is the explicit and direct fusion of prophetic language with state legitimacy - a moment where leadership is not merely *supported by* religious institutions but is framed as the very *fulfillment* of a spiritual destiny. The discourse of the "chosen one" thus functions as a powerful immunizing agent, shielding the ruler from critique and converting political debate into a question of faith. To dissent is not simply to disagree with policy; it is to doubt a divine ordinance, a move that reframes opposition as heresy (Agamben 2011; Abbink, 2014). This shift from a political to a moral-theocratic register is central to understanding the mechanics of eschatological governance, as it replaces the possibility of rational contestation with the absolutism of spiritual conviction.

Empirical analysis of the 18 speeches in the corpus reveals that references to divine purpose or prophetic destiny occur in 16 of them (89%). In his 2018 inaugural address, Abiy stated, "God has chosen Ethiopia for a special purpose. We are not here by accident; we are here by design." In a 2020 address on national unity, he declared: "The hand of God is upon this nation. We are walking a path that has been prepared for us since ancient times." These lexical choices - "chosen," "design," "prepared," "ancient times" - construct a temporality that extends beyond electoral cycles and political mandates, anchoring authority in a transcendent, pre-ordained order.

### *Crisis as Divine Ordinance: Theodicy and the Temporality of Suffering*

The second axis of this ideological discourse concerns the strategic narration of crisis. Eschatological governance systematically reframes governance failures, armed conflict, economic stagnation, and mass displacement not as the products of institutional weakness, policy error, or political miscalculation, but as events permitted by a higher power. These crises are depicted as necessary trials - a form of collective expiation or purification ordained for the political community. In the Ethiopian context, this narrative is encapsulated in the government's repeated mantra, appearing in 12 of the analyzed speeches, that "this generation must suffer," and that the fruits of the nation's arduous transformation will be harvested not by the present, but by a future generation. Within this frame, crisis is not a deviation from the nation's path but an ordained, and indeed necessary, phase in its teleological journey toward a predestined redemption.

This discursive move performs two critical functions. First, it operates as a political theodicy, diverting responsibility away from human institutions and onto the inscrutable will of the divine. Failures of the state are thus not failures; they

are components of a providential design that is beyond human comprehension or judgment. This resonates with what Bayart (2009) identifies as the “politics of providence,” a strategy that shifts accountability from governance to metaphysics. Second, it imbues present suffering with a sense of sacred purpose. The notion that enduring hardship is a virtue transforms passive endurance into an active sacrifice directed toward future redemption. Empirical research consistently highlights the persistence of weak institutions and a profound lack of accountability in Ethiopia’s governance structure (Abbink 2020; Aray 2018). The Ethiopian Policy Research Institute’s (2023) survey found that 62% of respondents agreed that “God determines the nation’s economic fate more than government policy,” suggesting significant internalization of this discursive frame. What the eschatological discourse achieves is to provide a moral and spiritual legitimacy for these structural deficits, rendering them meaningful within a grand, divine narrative.

Furthermore, this narrative embeds a specific temporality that is inherently future-oriented. Suffering is confined to the present precisely because the proper deliverance lies in a deferred future. The state, thereby, erects a covenant between generations: the current one must wait and endure, while the next will reap the harvest. This inter-generational pact serves as a powerful mechanism for postponing demands for immediate accountability and for transforming patience from a passive condition into an exalted civic virtue. The ultimate effect is to reshape the very expectations of citizenship: citizens are encouraged to live in a state of perpetual expectation for a promised future, rather than actively claiming their rights and holding power to account in the present.

A critical tension requires explicit attention here. Pentecostal and prosperity-oriented theology, which has significantly influenced Ethiopia’s religious landscape, typically emphasizes *earthly material success as a sign of divine favor* rather than deferred suffering. This appears to contradict the narrative of generational sacrifice. How is this tension resolved discursively? Analysis of speeches reveals a strategic calibration: the present suffering is framed as a “seed” that must “die” before bearing fruit, drawing on John 12:24 (“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit”). This metaphor reconciles prosperity theology with delayed gratification by reinterpreting current hardship as necessary investment in future abundance. The suffering is not meaningless; it is productive suffering, spiritual capital that will yield eschatological returns. This framing allows the regime to deploy prosperity discourse’s aspirational power while simultaneously justifying present deprivation.

*The Valorization of Sacrifice and the Political Technology of Deferral*

The third pillar of this ideological architecture is the systematic valorization of sacrifice. Within the framework of eschatological governance, sacrifice is transformed from a sign of systemic failure or defeat into a sacred pathway to national redemption. Citizens are interpellated not as rights-bearing individuals entitled to public services and accountable governance, but as participants in a national sacrificial rite whose rewards lie beyond the horizon of the visible present. The rhetoric that “this generation must suffer” is not merely a descriptive statement about current conditions; it is a prescriptive command, urging citizens to embrace their suffering as an integral part of the nation’s redemptive arc.

This represents a fundamental transformation of the social contract. The foundational compact between the state and its citizens - traditionally grounded in the state’s provision of security, justice, and welfare in exchange for legitimacy and obedience - is reconfigured into a covenant of endurance and hope. From the perspective of critical theory, this shift has profound normative implications. Instead of demanding public services, transparency, and institutional accountability, citizens are called upon to adopt the role of sacrificial actors, a logic that proves particularly potent in contexts of prolonged and multifaceted crisis (Mbembe 2001). The danger, however, lies in the co-option of this ethos. When suffering is valorized, the state can conveniently use this as a justification for deferred service provision, weakened public institutions, and the perpetual postponement of necessary political reforms. As Abbink (2023) notes, despite the regime’s transformative promises, governance deficits persist and the legitimacy gap remains wide. The rhetorical strategy of sacrifice and deferred deliverance functions as a crucial ideological buffer for this persistent gap.

Moreover, this valorization of sacrifice is inextricably tied to the construction of a future generation as the ultimate beneficiary. The present is framed as a transitional, liminal period where full fruition is perpetually out of reach. This temporal deferral has a dual political effect: it provides a moral license for delay (why provide services now when the harvest is destined for tomorrow?), and it relocates hope and agency outside the present moment, thereby systematically reducing the impetus for immediate political contestation. The combined effect is to re-orient the nature of political engagement, positioning citizens as reverent spectators of a future redemption narrative, rather than as active agents of change in the present political reality.

Analysis of the Prosperity Party’s (2021) manifesto reveals this logic explicitly: “We are building for our children and grandchildren. The fruits of today’s labor will be harvested by the next generation. This is the covenant of prosperity.” The term “covenant” (*qidan* in Amharic) carries profound theological resonance,

evoking biblical covenants between God and His people. By framing the development project as a covenant, the state positions itself as both the mediator of divine promise and the executor of sacred obligation, a framing that elevates policy implementation from technical administration to spiritual vocation.

In a nutshell, the ideological discourse of eschatological governance in Ethiopia coheres into a powerful and self-reinforcing legitimating regime. By sacralizing leadership, reframing crisis as divine ordinance, and extolling sacrifice as a civic duty, the government orchestrates a comprehensive shift in the locus of accountability. It moves the grounds of evaluation from institutional performance and policy outcomes to spiritual obedience and faith in a deferred deliverance. This discourse, while offering short-term narrative coherence and moral solace amidst chaos, fundamentally hollows out the premises of democratic citizenship and lays the groundwork for an authoritarian logic sanctified by a claim to divine purpose. The following section will examine how this ideological framework is translated from discourse into concrete institutional practices and governance strategies.

### **The Institutionalization of Prophetic Politics: From Discourse to Governance Strategy**

The potency of an ideological discourse is ultimately determined by its capacity to materialize within the institutions, policies, and daily practices of the state. Eschatological governance, while powerful as a narrative, would remain an abstract curiosity if it were not operationalized into a coherent, if hybrid, system of rule. This section argues that the Ethiopian regime has effectively translated its theological-political discourse into a suite of governance strategies that recalibrate the relationship between the state, its citizens, and time itself. This translation occurs through four key mechanisms: the strategic co-optation and management of religious institutions; the deployment of a developmental model that functions as a “political anti-politics machine”; the aesthetic and ritual performance of sovereignty; and the systematic weakening of secular accountability mechanisms through their replacement with theological justifications.

#### *Strategic Co-optation and the Management of Religious Capital*

A primary strategy in the institutionalization of eschatological governance is the deliberate co-optation and management of Ethiopia’s diverse religious field. Unlike a secular state that seeks separation, or a theocratic state that imposes a single doctrine, the current regime employs a pragmatic and strategic approach to

harness what can be termed “religious capital” for state objectives. This involves simultaneously aligning with, managing, and neutralizing religious institutions.

The relationship with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) is paradigmatic. The state, while no longer constitutionally entwined with the EOTC, actively engages in a politics of recognition and patronage. The government’s public involvement in high-level church affairs, such as mediating internal schisms in 2022 and 2023, is framed not as state overreach but as the leader’s divine mandate to ensure unity, echoing the historical role of the *Defender of the Faith*. As documented in EBC (2022) coverage, the Prime Minister in religious holiday eve speech stated: “The unity of the church is the unity of the nation. God has entrusted us with the care of both.” This intervention serves a dual purpose: it stabilizes a powerful institution that could otherwise become a locus of dissent, and it publicly demonstrates the Prime Minister’s role as a transcendent arbiter above mundane political and even ecclesiastical squabbles (Záhořík 2021).

Concurrently, the regime has cultivated a strong alliance with Pentecostal and Evangelical constituencies, whose growth-oriented, charismatic theology dovetails neatly with the Prosperity Party’s vision and Abiy’s personal prophetic narrative (Abbink 2021). The Prime Minister’s regular attendance at revival-style prayer gatherings, his public testimony about his personal faith journey, and the appointment of Evangelical followers to key government positions signal a strategic alignment. This alliance provides a potent counterbalance to the historical influence of the EOTC and creates a broad, multi-confessional base for the regime’s sacralized politics.

This management extends to the instrumentalization of interfaith platforms. Events like the nationally televised “Prayer for Peace” week in 2020 and 2022, which brought together Orthodox, Protestant, and Muslim leaders under state auspices, are not merely symbolic gestures. They are performative acts that position the state as the ultimate curator and guardian of national spirituality (Tadesse 2021). By staging itself as the convener of a unified religious front, the state absorbs the moral authority of these diverse traditions and presents itself as the indispensable center of a national covenant. This strategy transforms religion from a field of potential contestation into a managed resource for state legitimacy, a trend corroborated by data showing the increased mobilization of religious actors for political ends (ACLEDD 2023).

### *Developmental Eschatology as a “Political Anti-Politics Machine”*

The state’s developmental ideology, particularly the *Medemer* philosophy and the Prosperity Party’s manifesto, has been infused with a distinct eschatological

temporality that functions as a powerful depoliticizing tool. The core narrative - that the present generation must “plant the tree” while the next generation will “harvest the fruit” - is more than a call for patience; it is a theological framing of development that James Ferguson’s (1994) concept of the “anti-politics machine” helps to illuminate. Ferguson argued that mainstream development discourse often technicalizes and depoliticizes profound structural inequalities, rendering them administrative problems rather than issues of power and justice.

In Ethiopia, this process is not merely technical but *moral-theological*. The profound economic challenges - soaring inflation (averaging 30% annually 2020-2024), youth unemployment (estimated at 25%), and stark inequality (World Bank 2024; IMF 2023) - are not primarily framed as outcomes of policy choices, global market forces, or governance failures. Instead, they are narrated as a necessary “purification” or “spiritual struggle,” the inevitable “birth pangs” of a national rebirth (Ethiopian Government Communication Service. (2022) . In a major 2021 address on the economy, Abiy declared: “Prosperity is a covenant with God; every covenant demands sacrifice. The path to abundance passes through the valley of hardship.” This discourse constitutes a *political* anti-politics machine: it transmutes economic hardship from a subject of political debate and accountability into a test of faith and national character.

### *The Aesthetic and Ritual Performance of Sacralized Sovereignty*

Eschatological governance is sustained not only through policy and speech but through a carefully curated visual and ritual culture that performs the sacrality of the state. The regime has masterfully employed aesthetics and public ritual to create a sensory experience of prophetic leadership, making the theological claims of the state tangible and emotionally resonant.

This is evident in the official iconography. Posters and murals of the Prime Minister frequently depict him surrounded by doves, rays of light, or in poses of serene contemplation - iconography directly borrowed from Pentecostal and Orthodox visual traditions. State television broadcasts often juxtapose footage of infrastructure projects or military operations with soaring hymns and scriptural quotations, framing state action as a form of divine ministry or holy war. Analysis of 12 EBC broadcasts reveals that 10 (83%) incorporated religious music or imagery in coverage of state functions. This aesthetic strategy contributes to what Kahn (2011) identifies as the “sacred foundation of sovereignty,” where political authority is experienced not as a legal-rational construct but as a form of revelation.

Furthermore, the state has institutionalized a calendar of political rituals infused with religious significance. National fasting days, prayer marches, and

thanksgiving ceremonies are organized as state events. The Prime Minister's speeches often follow a liturgical structure: they begin with a reading from scriptures (frequently Psalms or Isaiah) before transitioning to policy announcements. In his 2022 Victory Day speech, he opened with Isaiah 60:1 ("Arise, shine, for your light has come") before detailing reconstruction plans. This ritual framing imbues political communication with a sense of religious transcendence, allowing the government to claim a moral monopoly. The political rally is thus transformed into a revival meeting, and the head of government becomes a pastor-in-chief, governing the soul as much as the body (Tadesse 2021). This performance of pastoral power blurs the line between spiritual exhortation and political command, making dissent feel not just disloyal, but impious.

### *The Systematic Weakening of Secular Accountability Mechanisms*

The final and most consequential strategy in the institutionalization of eschatological governance is the systematic erosion and replacement of secular accountability mechanisms. When legitimacy is derived from prophecy and divine will, the institutions designed for horizontal accountability - parliaments, courts, independent media, electoral commissions - become inconvenient constraints. The regime's discourse provides the perfect ideological justification for their marginalization.

The logic is straightforward: if the leader is divinely chosen and the path is preordained, then parliamentary debate, judicial review, and a free press are not essential components of democratic governance but potential obstructions to the fulfillment of a divine mission. Critique is re-signified as "disbelief" or a lack of faith (De Waal 2022). This has a chilling effect on the political space. As Freedom House (2024) data indicates, Ethiopia's civic space has dramatically narrowed since 2018, with its rating plummeting from 24/100 in 2018 to 12/100 in 2024. Independent media face prosecution, and civil society organizations are constrained, often under the moral rhetoric of preserving national unity.

This process creates a governance paradox: a state with a robust constitutional framework for accountability (Araya 2018) that is rendered inoperative by a political theology that operates above it. Peace negotiations, for instance, are framed not as hard-nosed political compromises based on constitutional principles and power-sharing, but as exercises in "spiritual reconciliation." Following the 2022 Pretoria agreement, Abiy stated, "This is not just a political deal; it is a spiritual covenant. God has healed our land." This framing elides the need for addressing core political grievances and institutional reforms, as the solution is located in a change of heart rather than a change of policy

or structure. The result, as Kelsall (2023) warns in a different context, is that “charismatic moralization replaces bureaucratic reasoning,” producing a system of impunity where failures are excused as part of a divine plan and opposition is stigmatized as a spiritual failing. The state, in effect, governs by grace, not by law, creating a volatile political order where accountability is deferred to the divine, and power is concentrated in the hands of those who claim to interpret His will.

### **The Costs of Covenant: Implications for Democratic Pluralism, Accountability, and Human Rights**

The institutionalization of an eschatological governance model, while potentially offering a veneer of moral cohesion in a fractured polity, exacts a profound toll on the foundations of a democratic and pluralistic society. This section argues that the fusion of prophetic destiny with statecraft in Ethiopia systematically erodes the pillars of modern governance: it hollows out democratic accountability, legitimizes a necropolitical hierarchy of life, forecloses the space for pluralistic dialogue, and ultimately transforms citizens into supplicants. The consequences are not merely theoretical but manifest in the tangible contraction of civic space, the normalization of impunity, and the deepening of social fractures.

Before proceeding, it is essential to acknowledge alternative analytical perspectives. The regime’s engagement with religion could be interpreted not as genuine theological conviction but as strategic populism or Machiavellian political pragmatism. From this view, the mobilization of religious discourse is a calculated instrument to broaden legitimacy, manage dissent, and consolidate power in a deeply religious society. The simultaneous cultivation of Orthodox, Protestant, and Muslim constituencies suggests a strategic calculus rather than theological coherence. While this instrumentalist interpretation has merit, it is not mutually exclusive with the eschatological governance thesis. Indeed, the most effective ideological formations often blend genuine conviction with strategic calculation. The analysis here focuses on the *effects* of discourse regardless of intent: whether sincerely believed or strategically deployed, the eschatological framing produces real political consequences that require critical examination.

#### *The Hollowing of Democratic Accountability: From Citizens to Believers*

The most direct casualty of eschatological governance is the principle of democratic accountability. In a functioning democracy, legitimacy is derived from the consent of the governed, and power is exercised through institutions designed to check its abuse. The social contract is a compact of mutual obligation

between the state and its citizens, grounded in the delivery of rights, security, and welfare. The Ethiopian model fundamentally subverts this contract, replacing it with a theocratic covenant.

Within this covenant, the relationship is reoriented. The state becomes the mediator of a divine plan, and the citizen's primary duty shifts from critical engagement to faithful obedience. As one's status shifts from *citizen* to *believer*, the mechanisms of accountability become obsolete. Why demand transparency, audit public funds, or question policy efficacy when the leader's mandate is celestial and all events are part of a providential narrative? This logic was starkly visible when the government framed catastrophic human suffering during the conflict in Tigray not as a consequence of warfare and blockade, but as "divine corrections" or "inevitable birth pangs of national renewal" (UN OCHA 2022; De Waal 2022).

This hollowing out is empirically evidenced by Ethiopia's precipitous decline in global democratic indices. The Freedom House rating plummeting from 24/100 in 2018 to 12/100 in 2024 is not a coincidence but a correlate of this governance model (Freedom House 2024). When dissent is framed as sacrilege, parliamentary debate becomes a ceremonial endorsement, the judiciary hesitates to challenge "divine will," and independent media is silenced under accusations of undermining national unity - a unity defined by adherence to a state-sanctioned destiny. The state thereby achieves what Agamben (2011) described as the separation of "office" from "effectivity," where formal institutions remain in place but are drained of all real power, which is concentrated in the charismatic, prophetic figure whose authority transcends them.

### *Necropolitical Theology: The Sanctification of Suffering and the Hierarchy of Life*

A second, more sinister implication lies in what can be termed a necropolitical theology, building on Achille Mbembe's (2019) concept of necropolitics - the power to dictate who may live and who must die. Eschatological governance introduces a moral and spiritual hierarchy into this calculus. It does not merely manage life; it assigns sacred or profane *meaning* to suffering and death. Within the state's narrative, not all suffering is equal. The sacrifices endured by those aligned with the state's prophetic mission are framed as "redemptive" and "purifying." Their pain is endowed with purpose and national significance.

Conversely, the suffering of those perceived as opponents or obstacles to the divine plan - be they certain ethnic groups, political opponents, or civilians in conflict zones - is often implicitly or explicitly characterized as deserved punishment, a "divine discipline" for their resistance. This creates a theological justification for immense human suffering, stripping it of its political causality

and moral horror. The victims of violence or state neglect are not seen as citizens whose rights have been violated, but as actors in a cosmic drama whose fate serves as a lesson or a necessary step toward a higher goal. This is the ultimate depoliticization of human life: when death and suffering are woven into a narrative of salvation, the state is absolved of its fundamental responsibility to protect and serve *all* its people. It decides, in a metaphysical sense, whose life is grievable and whose death is instrumental to the nation's sacred trajectory.

### *The Foreclosure of Pluralism and the Demonization of Dissent*

Ethiopia is a nation of profound diversity, comprising a multitude of ethnicities, languages, and faiths. A sustainable political order must therefore be predicated on negotiation, compromise, and the institutional accommodation of difference - the very essence of pluralism. Eschatological governance is inherently hostile to this pluralistic imperative. Its claim to truth is absolute and non-negotiable; it is based on a singular, state-sponsored prophetic narrative that brooks no alternative interpretations.

This creates an environment where dissent is not merely disagreed with but demonized. Political opposition is recast as spiritual rebellion. Ethnic demands for self-determination are not treated as legitimate constitutional or political claims but as manifestations of faithlessness, attempts to fracture a divinely ordained unity. As the Ethiopian Council of Churches (2023) cautioned in its pastoral letter, there is a grave danger in "equating divine will with state policy." Such an equation leaves no room for legitimate disagreement. The complex, messy, and inherently secular business of negotiating the terms of collective life in a multi-ethnic state is replaced by a demand for uniform belief. This dynamic exacerbates, rather than heals, the country's deep-seated ethnic fragmentation (Fisher & Meressa 2019; Dejen, 2018; Abbink 2024). By refusing to engage with competing political projects on their own terms and instead elevating every conflict to a spiritual plane, the state forecloses the possibility of a genuinely inclusive political dialogue, pushing those who disagree further to the margins and often toward more radical forms of resistance.

### *The Paradox of Hope: Deferred Deliverance and Political Passivity*

Finally, the eschatological model cultivates a form of political passivity disguised as virtuous hope. The relentless emphasis on a future deliverance, a prosperity that is always just beyond the horizon, serves as a powerful anesthetic for present grievances. The discourse that "the next generation will harvest" is a political

technology of patience, training citizens to be spectators of a promised future rather than architects of their present.

This creates a paradox: the language of hope and destiny can be mobilizing in the short term, creating a sense of shared purpose. However, when this hope is perpetually deferred and untethered from tangible, accountable action in the present, it curdles into a form of fatalism. The 2023 opinion poll data, showing a majority belief that God, not policy, determines the economic fate, is a testament to this (Ethiopian Policy Research Institute 2023). This fatalism is the antithesis of democratic agency. It discourages citizens from organizing, demanding better services, or challenging corruption, as the prevailing narrative suggests that their plight is a necessary, if painful, part of a grand design. The state's role thus shifts from a service provider to a prophet, and the citizen's role shifts from a rights-holder to a pilgrim on a long, arduous journey whose end they may never see. This undermines the very impetus for the collective action and civic engagement that are the lifeblood of any robust democracy.

In conclusion, the implications of Ethiopia's eschatological turn are dire. It represents not just a different style of governance, but a fundamental reconstitution of the political realm that undermines accountability, sanctifies inequality of suffering, stifles pluralism, and breeds a passive citizenry. The following concluding section will explore potential pathways for resisting this model and reclaiming a political imagination grounded in secular, democratic, and humanistic principles.

## Conclusion

This article has charted a profound transformation in the foundation of Ethiopian political order: the deliberate shift from a Social Contract to a Gospel Covenant. Through systematic analysis of a corpus of 47 political speeches, policy documents, media broadcasts, and visual materials from 2018 to 2024, this study has demonstrated that under the leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the state has engineered a system of eschatological statecraft, moving beyond a secular constitutional model to one that fuses prophetic narrative, divine determinism, and a theology of redemptive suffering into a coherent political technology. This is not a superficial rhetorical campaign but a fundamental recalibration of governance designed to sacralize authority, depoliticize crisis, and defer accountability into a perpetually receding future.

The implications of this shift are severe and systematically corrosive to democratic life. Eschatological governance hollows out accountability by transforming citizens into believers and dissent into heresy. It institutes a necropolitical hierarchy that sanctifies the suffering of adherents while rationalizing the oppression of opponents

as divine discipline. It forecloses pluralism by presenting the state's mission as a non-negotiable prophetic destiny. Ultimately, it cultivates a culture of political passivity, training citizens to be pilgrims awaiting deliverance rather than active agents shaping their collective present. In doing so, it does not resolve Ethiopia's profound challenges of ethnic fragmentation, institutional weakness, and economic disparity; instead, it mystifies them within a theological narrative that excuses inaction and sanctifies impunity.

The critical task, therefore, is to envision and enact pathways for reclaiming the political from the grip of this prophetic framework. This requires a multi-pronged effort to re-secularize public reason and rebuild institutions on a foundation of human accountability. Several pathways are vital:

First, there is an urgent need for robust civic and theological counter-narratives. Religious leaders, intellectuals, and civil society must articulate a public theology that disentangles faith from state power, insisting that divine purpose cannot be monopolized by any political project and that true faith demands justice and accountability.

Second, a renewed emphasis on constitutional patriotism and civic education is essential. The social contract, as enshrined in the constitution, must be revitalized as the central framework for political life. This means championing the principle that legitimacy flows from upholding citizens' rights and submitting to institutional oversight - not from fulfilling a prophetic destiny.

Third, strengthening secular accountability mechanisms is a practical imperative. Independent media, an empowered judiciary, and vibrant civil society organizations must be supported to investigate and challenge governance failures on their own terms - as policy mistakes and human rights violations - rather than accepting them as metaphysical inevitabilities.

Fourth, scholars and policymakers must recognize that resolving Ethiopia's crises requires addressing their secular, political roots. The conflicts across the nation are not cosmic battles but struggles over power, resources, and identity. Peace will be achieved through good-faith political negotiation and a commitment to inclusive justice, not through national prayer alone. [END]

In the final analysis, the promise of Ethiopia's future cannot be mortgaged to a prophecy. The Gospel Covenant offered by the state is a political construct that risks entrenching a cycle of sacred suffering. The escape from this eschatological governance begins with a simple, yet radical, act: reclaiming sovereignty from the realm of destiny and returning it to the hands of the people, where the difficult, democratic work of building a just society must truly begin.

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## Од друштвеног уговора до јеванђеоског завета: Есхатологија и препород пророчке политике у Етиопији

**Сажетак:** Овај чланак тврди да савремена Етиопија сведочи о темељној трансформацији своје политичке основе, прелазећи са секуларног друштвеног уговора ка сакрализованом јеванђеоском завету. Рад критикује појаву „есхатолошког управљања државом” под премијером Абијем Ахмедом, при чему режим стратешки мобилише пентекостално-харизматске теолошке концепте—посебно пророчку судбину и искупитељско страдање—као кључну технологију владавине. Користећи квалитативни истраживачки приступ заснован на критичкој анализи дискурса (CDA), студија систематски испитује корпус од 47 политичких говора, докумената јавних политика, медијских емисија и визуелних пропагандних материјала из периода од 2018. до 2024. године. Анализа показује како режим конструише наратив који премијера представља као божански изабраног вођу, за кога му је мајка још у његовој седмој години прорекла посебну судбину, док се његова владавина приказује као унапред одређено поглавље у националном божанском плану. У оквиру ове парадигме, кризе попут рата, економског колапса и друштвене фрагментације не представљају се као неуспеси власти, већ као божански допуштена искушења неопходна за национално прочишћење. Истовремено, развојна реторика државе користи снажну есхатологију страдања, позивајући садашњу генерацију да прихвати жртву као грађанску дужност ради будућег просперитета који ће видети тек њихова деца. Ослањајући се на политичку теологију и постколонијалну теорију, рад анализира како ова дискурзивна фузија гради морализован политички поредак који сакрализује власт, док истовремено систематски деполитизује одговорност. Чланак закључује да овај препород пророчке политике суштински подрива демократску одговорност, замењујући је логиком божанског детерминизма који затвара простор за критичко грађанство, плуралистички дијалог и институционални надзор, чиме се учвршћује облик ауторитаризма под плаштом духовне мисије.

**Кључне речи:** есхатологија, политичка теологија, пророчка политика, друштвени уговор, јеванђеоски завет, Етиопија