Little is understood in Ethiopia of the concept of ‘developmental state’ (at least outside of EPRDF leadership circles) and there is no effort to discuss the concept in this rather short piece. But it will be naive to understand what is going on in Ethiopia (in the last decade) without tracing the roots of this concept and what is entrenched in the Ethiopian constitution. There is little doubt that the Ethiopian constitution has some liberal elements but it also has some leftist elements. To begin with the constitution provides for a broad range of human rights both for the individual and for groups (labelled as nations, nationalities and peoples) and at the same time puts a supreme constitution (Art 9). If this clause is taken for what it is, it means that power is limited and all actors are bound to respect it, else their actions will be voided for violating the supreme law. An independent judiciary is established in the constitution, albeit that it has no mandate to resolve constitutional disputes. This principle has both liberal and leftist elements. On one hand it does set an independent judicial organ for settling legal disputes in an impartial manner but at the same time vests the crucial power of resolving constitutional issues to the House of Federation. So it seems the judiciary is meant to settle only as the Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni once said ‘judges need to settle chicken and goat theft cases.’ What role the judiciary needs to play in any political system is surely one of the hotly contested issues in politics but the importance of an impartial courts in public life cannot be underestimated, else the powerful will take the law into their hands and sooner or later politics will be in trouble and whatever developments we achieve can easily be reversed. The rule of law along with impartial courts gives legal backing to development and ensures some level of political stability. In the absence of the rule of law and impartial courts one cannot think of long term investments domestic or foreign. One an investor thinks of investing his/her money the first thing checked is the legal and policy framework for establishing it and the next is whether there is an impartial court where if a dispute arises then there will be a fair hearing in a relatively short period of time.¹

More importantly, multiparty party system is installed in the constitution. A party or a coalition of parties that wins a majority in parliament has the mandate to establish the government. By any standard this is the core of liberalism that guarantees the political process to remain democratic. At its core is the presence of choices in the form of political parties, candidates and policies and for that to be realized, there needs to be many parties in the game. How many such political parties is a problematic issue but in the long run some three or four² bigger and more or less ideologically cohesive³ and with comparable political

¹ As the saying goes ‘justice delayed is justice denied’ and the opposite is ‘justice rushed is justice crushed’- both are dangers that need to be avoided.
² If we were to talk about politics in real the number could even be less. If politics is merely about ideology (it surely is not, it is more importantly about grabbing power) then we can only think of liberals, social democrats and that of EPRDF’s Revolutionary Democracy/Developmental state. One could not understand for example
weight need to exist, if there is going to be a multiparty election with alternative choices to
the voter. Here we see a more liberal element in the Ethiopian constitution when compared
with the Chinese one. The Chinese constitution makes no mistakes. It declares a one party
socialist state with the communist party as a sole and vanguard one but again with its own
interesting characters: in the last two decades the chairman of the party and along with it
the Country’s President has changed several times. The Chinese constitution does not
promise like ours a multiparty system. Yet knowingly or un knowingly, Ethiopian political
leaders have over the last decade adapted the developmental state paradigm from Asia
including China. Yet even in China under one party state the economy is a bit liberal to some
extent. It is not a planned economy to be sure. The government has big role but China also
allows various other actors like private and foreign investors to engage freely in business. So
the developmental state in its economic terms is what seems as well is operational in
Ethiopia right now where the government leads the economy but there is also room for
local and foreign investors to engage in the economy. What seems to be paradoxical is the
promise we have made in the constitution as far as the political system is concerned: a
multiparty system in the books and the actual practice we have right now. Whether the
political system we have right now it is a ‘dominant party’\(^4\) as claimed by EPRDF or
‘hegemonic/one party system’\(^5\) labelled by its critics is yet to be seen. But there surely is
something in the making. EPRDF’s political vision for the next decades envisages a vanguard
party/awra party. What then is the role of the political opposition supposed to be? And
what is the state of political pluralism supposed to be in this context. Are we moving away
from multiparty democracy to something else owing to ‘developmental state’ and how are
we going to explain that in relation to the constitutional promise of multiparty democracy?

Another area of dilemma one observes is in relation to the role of the media and freedom of
expression. As per the constitution the media including those publicly funded (government
owned media) are required to reflect diversity of opinions (check this under Art 29). Space
does not allow to illustrate details on the role of the media but in brief media needs to

\(^4\) As far as we can understand from history for example of Japan a ‘dominant party’ is not necessarily
undemocratic. The idea is that voters continue to vote for the same party in consecutive elections because
they are satisfied with its performance. The Liberal Democratic Party was one such type that ruled Japan for
nearly four decades. Voters do not complain about election rigging or opposition intimidation in the political
process. The rules of the game are well known in advance and are less contested.

\(^5\) A hegemonic party as articulated by a well known political scientist Giovanni Sartori is not democratic like the
dominant party one. There is an opposition but the likely hood of winning an election is almost impossible.
Voters and political parties often complain about election irregularities and on the lack of an equal playing
field. The impartiality of those who administer the election is often contested as well or there is a perception
of that sort in the public. In a nut shell hegemonic party is distinct from dominant party system and is found
somewhere between dominant and one party state.
reflect the diversity of opinions that exist in society. As such the media is ideally supposed to be the ‘market place of ideas’. In a multiparty politics the media is supposed to play a critical role by serving as a forum for debate for the different opinions of the parties and the public, in ensuring transparency and exposing maladministration including corruption. Only such a media can inform the voter better in making its decisions. Yet we hear that what EPRDF envisages as a role of the media is to serve as an ‘agent of developmental state’. Abandoning its other critical roles the media is required to be limatawi – reporting merely the developmental achievements of EPRDF.\(^6\) The journalists are nicknamed limatawi gazetegna reporting only developmental news. I have no problems with the fair coverage allotted in the news for developmental projects but the problem is ‘is the media merely supposed to report about development’? is not EPRDF complaining about wide spread corruption? Is not the public worried about the corruption? Should not the voter know details about its political leaders both good and bad? So how do we deal with the dilemma where the media is required by the constitution to play an important and diverse role while developmental state dictating and requiring only limatawi media? Are we moving away from ‘the social-political contract’ towards Chinese style of governance? Again let’s not make mistakes here. The Chinese never promised diversity of opinions in the media as we did in our constitution and we cannot blame them for what they have not promised to their people. Ours is different. We have promised one thing and we are delivering something else! Is this the result of an ideological shift or what?

\(^6\) As opposed to those media outlets like wenchif, seife nebelsbal bla bla that merely reported about the negative side of politics and preached now and then about hate politics and probably have contributed to the state where we are now.