

Collective Action for Public Health, Fragmented Action for Public Peace: Institutional Resilience and Failure in Ethiopia's Religious Councils

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Abstract:

Ethiopia's Inter Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) successfully mobilised collective action against COVID 19 but has failed to mediate the country's multiple ethnic conflicts. This paradox challenges assumptions about the peacebuilding potential of religious institutions. This study investigates why the same religious institutions demonstrate high collective action for public health but fragmentation for peace, testing whether threat type (exogenous vs. endogenous) explains divergent outcomes. A comparative case study design was employed, comparing the IRCE's response to COVID 19 (exogenous threat) with four ethnic conflicts (endogenous threats): Tigray, Oromo, Amhara, and Gurage. Data sources included IRCE public statements, news archives, ACLED conflict data, NGO reports, and peer reviewed literature. Analysis traced five criteria: public statements, ceasefire calls, mediation attempts, humanitarian roles, and internal unity. Findings: COVID 19 produced high collective action, leader neutrality, state partnership, clear positive sum goals, and success. All four ethnic conflicts produced low to very low collective action, loss of leader neutrality, the state as protagonist, zero sum goals, and failure. The Gurage case involving co religionists on both sides demonstrated that even shared faith cannot overcome endogenous partisan divisions. Foundational weaknesses include government co optation of religious leaders into the ruling party, financial dependency, and abandonment of religious doctrines demanding justice. Ethnic identity overrides religious authority in endogenous conflicts. The IRCE's institutional design assumes neutrality that no longer exists when the state is a belligerent and leaders share ethnic identities with combatants. Institutional resilience is domain specific: success in public health does not transfer to peacebuilding. During active civil wars, donors should support local, traditional peace custodians (e.g., Aba Gars) rather than national inter religious councils, and prioritise internal ethnic de escalation within religious bodies before external mediation.

Keywords:

Ethio-ecofeminism; Safuu; Genesis 2; Ethiopian women; climate justice

I. Introduction

Ethiopia's Inter Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) achieved a remarkable feat during the COVID 19 pandemic. Faith leaders from seven major traditions—Orthodox, Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, Seventh day Adventist, Mekane Yesus, and Kale Heywet—coordinated to close worship places, disseminate public health messages, and advocate for vaccination. In a country where religion permeates daily life for over 97% of the population, this unified response represented an extraordinary instance of institutional resilience and inter religious cooperation (Yibeltal et al., 2024).

Yet the same religious councils that helped contain a global health emergency have largely failed to stop the ethnic and political violence that has torn Ethiopia apart since 2020. From the Tigray war (2020–2022) to the Oromo insurgency (2018–present), the Amhara conflict (2023–present), and the Gurage communal clashes (2021–present), religious leaders have issued appeals for peace and dialogue, but their interventions have produced no durable ceasefires, no signed agreements, and no sustained reduction in violence. This stark contrast raises a puzzling question: Why do the same religious institutions demonstrate high collective action for public health but fragmentation for peace?

This paper argues that the answer lies in the nature of the threat. An exogenous, non-partisan threat, a virus that infects all ethnic groups equally enables religious leaders to act as neutral, trusted partners of the state and the public. In contrast, endogenous, partisan threats armed conflicts rooted in ethnic grievances, political competition, and territorial claims embed religious leaders within the conflict itself. When the state becomes a protagonist rather than a partner, and when a leader's own ethnic identity aligns with one side of a zero sum struggle, the moral authority that underpinned collective action for public health dissipates. Institutional resilience in one domain does not automatically transfer to another.

To test this argument, we compare the IRCE's response to COVID 19 with its engagement in four contemporary ethnic conflicts: Tigray, Oromo, Amhara, and Gurage. These cases provide systematic variation on the independent variable threat type (exogenous vs. endogenous), while holding the institutional actor constant. Using a comparative case study design with narrative analysis of IRCE public statements, news archives, conflict event data (ACLED), and NGO reports, we trace the IRCE's actions across five criteria: public statements, ceasefire calls, mediation attempts, humanitarian roles, and internal unity.

The findings reveal a consistent pattern. COVID 19 produced high collective action, leader neutrality, state partnership, clear positive sum goals, and success. All four ethnic conflicts produced low to very low collective action, loss of leader neutrality, the state as protagonist, zero sum goals, and failure. The Gurage case involving co religionists on both sides of the conflict demonstrates that even shared faith cannot overcome endogenous partisan divisions. Foundational weaknesses compound this problem: government co optation of religious leaders into the ruling party, financial dependency, and the abandonment of religious doctrines demanding justice render the IRCE structurally incapable of prophetic peacebuilding.

This paper makes three contributions. First, it extends collective action theory (Ostrom, 1990, 2005) to religious institutions, showing that the conditions for successful cooperation differ systematically across crisis domains. Second, it challenges the assumption that religious peacebuilding relies primarily on moral authority (Appleby, 2000), demonstrating that moral authority is conditional on the perceived neutrality of religious actors, which endogenous threats systematically undermine. Third, it offers a comparative framework for understanding institutional resilience and its limits in multi ethnic, religiously diverse societies facing overlapping crises.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on religious peacebuilding, collective action, and Ethiopian religious politics, identifying the gap this research addresses. Section 3 presents the methodology, including case selection, data sources, and analytical procedures. Sections 4 through 7 present empirical findings for COVID 19, Tigray, Oromo, Amhara, and Gurage respectively. Section 8 offers comparative analysis across cases, identifying

causal mechanisms. Section 9 discusses theoretical and policy implications and Section 10 concludes.

II. Review of Literature

This section reviews four interconnected literatures: (1) religious peacebuilding and its limits, (2) collective action theory and its application to religious institutions, (3) institutional resilience and its domain specificity, (4) threat type and securitization, and (5) Ethiopian religious politics. The review identifies the gap this research addresses.

2.1 Religious Peacebuilding: Moral Authority and Its Limits

Scholars have long argued that faith-based actors possess unique resources for conflict resolution. Appleby's (2000) seminal work demonstrated that religion can be "administered in such a prudent, selective, and deliberate fashion so as to allow it consistently to contribute to a peaceful resolution of conflicts" (p. 8). Religious actors bring moral authority, access to grassroots communities, and a long-term commitment that secular peacebuilders often lack (Johnston, 2003; Smock, 2006). In settings where state institutions are weak or distrusted, religious leaders may be the only actors capable of mediating between warring parties (Haynes, 2009).

However, this literature has increasingly recognized the limits of religious peacebuilding. Religious actors are rarely fully neutral; their involvement in political processes can undermine their moral authority (Hoffman, 2019). In deeply polarized societies, religious leaders themselves may belong to conflicting ethnic or political groups, making genuine impartiality impossible (Omer, 2025). This paper builds on this critical turn by asking: under what conditions does the same religious institution succeed in mobilizing collective action for one type of crisis but fail for another?

2.2 Collective Action Theory and Religious Institutions

Elinor Ostrom's (1990, 2005) work fundamentally challenged the assumption that common-pool resource problems inevitably lead to free-riding and institutional failure. Her Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework identified design principles that enable self-governing groups to overcome collective action dilemmas: clearly defined boundaries, congruence between rules and local conditions, collective-choice arrangements, monitoring, graduated sanctions, conflict-resolution mechanisms, and nested governance (Pichancourt et al., 2025).

Most applications of Ostrom's framework have focused on natural resource management and public goods provision (Poteete, 2022). Few studies have applied collective action theory to religious institutions, and almost none have compared collective action across different types of threats within the same institutional setting. This paper fills that gap by treating the IRCE as a self-governing collective action institution and examining how variations in threat characteristics (exogenous vs. endogenous, partisan vs. non partisan) affect its ability to mobilize members and enforce compliance.

2.3 Institutional Resilience: Domain Specificity

Institutional resilience refers to an organization's capacity to adapt, learn, and maintain core functions in the face of shocks (Anderies et al., 2004; Carpenter, 2010). Resilience is often conceptualized as a general property, but growing evidence suggests it is domain specific: an institution that adapts successfully to one type of crisis may fail catastrophically when confronted

with a different kind of shock (Holling, 1973; Folke et al., 2010). This paper contributes to this literature by documenting a case of high resilience in public health and low resilience in peacebuilding within the same set of institutions.

2.4 Threat Type and Securitization

Securitization theory, developed by the Copenhagen School, holds that threats are socially constructed through speech acts that frame an issue as an existential challenge requiring extraordinary measures (Buzan et al., 1998; Stritzel, 2007). This paper distinguishes between two ideal typical threat categories: exogenous threats (pandemics, natural disasters, external invasion) that originate outside society and affect all groups indiscriminately, tending to unify actors; and endogenous threats (civil wars, ethnic violence, secessionist movements) that originate within society and are rooted in identity, resource, or power competition, tending to fragment actors.

This distinction has been overlooked in the securitization literature, which has focused primarily on how threats are constructed rather than on how their structural characteristics shape collective action possibilities (Sperling & Webber, 2019). This paper introduces threat type as a key explanatory variable for religious institutional performance.

2.5 Ethiopian Religious Politics and the IRCE

Ethiopia is an overwhelmingly religious country: approximately 97% of the population claims affiliation with a major religious tradition (Inter Religious Council of Ethiopia, n.d.). The country's religious landscape includes Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity (roughly 43%), Islam (approximately 31%), and Protestant denominations (about 22%) (Østebø, 2023). This religious diversity has historically been characterized by peaceful coexistence (Ojulu, 2018).

The Inter Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) was established in 2010 by full consensus of the country's seven major religious institutions (Inter Religious Council of Ethiopia, n.d.). Its mission is to "promote peaceful coexistence and collaboration among religious institutions and communities in Ethiopia" (Inter Religious Council of Ethiopia, 2023, "Mission" section). The IRCE has been recognized by the Ministry of Federal Affairs and has expanded its activities to regional and district levels.

Ethiopia's political context has changed dramatically since the IRCE's founding. The 2018 transition brought Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power, initially promising democratic reforms and national reconciliation. However, this period also witnessed a sharp rise in ethnic and political violence (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2026). Ethiopia adopted a system of ethnic federalism in 1995, which organizes regional states along ethnolinguistic lines (Abbink, 2011; Toggia, 2018). Critics argue that ethnic federalism has hardened identity boundaries and contributed to state fragmentation (Turton, 2006; Vaughan, 2011). Since 2018, dozens of ethnic militias have emerged, and conflicts have resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and the displacement of over 3.3 million people (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2026).

2.6 The Gap: No Comparative Analysis of Health vs. Peace Outcomes

Despite extensive research on religious peacebuilding, collective action, and Ethiopian politics, no existing study has systematically compared the performance of the same religious institutions across different crisis domains. Studies of the IRCE have described its formation and declared objectives (Antigegn, 2019) but have not evaluated its effectiveness. The COVID 19 literature has documented the crucial role of Ethiopian faith leaders as public health allies (Yibeltal et al., 2024) but has not asked whether the same cooperative capacity extends to

peacebuilding. This paper addresses that gap by conducting a comparative analysis of the IRCE's performance across five cases: one health crisis and four ethnic conflicts. By holding the institutional actor constant and varying the type of threat, this design enables causal inference about the conditions under which religious institutions succeed or fail in collective action.

III. Research Methods

This section details the research design, case selection, data sources, analytical procedures, and ethical considerations. The study employs a comparative case study design with systematic narrative analysis to investigate why Ethiopia's Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) succeeded in collective action during COVID-19 but failed in peacebuilding across four ethnic conflicts.

3.1 Research Design

We adopt a comparative case study design (George & Bennett, 2005). The design compares one health crisis (COVID-19) with four ethnic-political conflict cases (Tigray, Oromo, Amhara, Gurage). The COVID-19 case serves as a positive control context where collective action is expected to succeed revealing the mechanisms that enable institutional resilience. The four conflict cases serve as test cases where collective action is expected to fragment or fail, revealing barriers to institutional effectiveness.

The design holds the institutional actor (IRCE) constant and varies the independent variable: threat type (exogenous vs. endogenous). This enables controlled comparison and within-case causal inference.

3.2 Case Selection Justification

Case selection follows most-similar-systems logic. All five cases occur within the same national institutional context during overlapping time periods (2020–2026). Selection criteria include:

Variation on threat type: COVID-19 is a paradigmatic exogenous threat (non-partisan, indiscriminate). The four ethnic conflicts are endogenous threats (rooted in internal competition over power, territory, and identity).

Geographic and ethnic diversity: Cases span Ethiopia's major regions Tigray (north), Oromo (west/south), Amhara (north-central), Gurage (central/south) ensuring findings are not region-specific.

Different conflict dynamics: The conflicts exhibit distinct structural characteristics: conventional civil war (Tigray), asymmetric insurgency (Oromo), post-alliance rebellion (Amhara), and inter-communal violence with state-society contestation (Gurage).

Varied religious compositions: This allows testing whether shared faith across ethnic lines affects mediation capacity. The Gurage case is particularly important as it involves co-religionists (Orthodox Christian on both sides in some dyads) and religious difference (Orthodox vs. Muslim) in others.

3.3 Data Sources

Data triangulation draws from multiple sources:

Table 1: The data type and its source

Data Type	Sources
IRCE public statements	IRCE official website (ircethiopia.et), press releases, Facebook page
News archives	Addis Standard, The Reporter Ethiopia, BBC Amharic, AllAfrica
Conflict event data	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED); Ethiopia Peace Observatory (EPO)
NGO and human rights reports	Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group, Ethiopian Human Rights Commission
Scholarly literature	Peer-reviewed articles and books on Ethiopian religious politics and peacebuilding

No interviews were conducted for this study; the methodology relies entirely on publicly available documentary sources. This is a limitation acknowledged below.

3.4 Analytical Method: Comparative Narrative Analysis

For each of the five cases, we assess whether the IRCE and its member religious bodies engaged in five key actions:

- Issued a public statement (timing, specificity)
- Called for ceasefire or dialogue (specific demands vs. general appeal)
- Attempted mediation (who mediated, outcome)
- Facilitated humanitarian access (what was facilitated)
- Remained publicly unified or fractured (evidence of internal disagreement)

These criteria operationalize collective action (coordinated response) and fragmentation (breakdown of coordination). Findings are summarized in a comparative matrix.

The analysis proceeds as narrative case study with systematic cross-case comparison. We trace the presence or absence of each criterion across cases, identifying patterns that link threat type to outcomes.

3.5 Limitations and Mitigations

Table 2: The limitations and the mitigations strategies

Limitation	Mitigation
No access to conflict zones	Reliance on publicly available conflict data (ACLED/EPO) and NGO reports provides systematic coverage
IRCE internal decision-making opacity	Public statements serve as proxy for institutional positions; absence of statements is meaningful data
Gurage conflict under-reported	Frame findings as preliminary; acknowledge need for future fieldwork
No interviews conducted	Transparently state this limitation; rely on documentary triangulation
Researcher positionality	Authors disclose no ethnic or religious affiliations that would bias case selection or interpretation

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This research adheres to ethical guidelines for social science research. All sources are publicly available and cited appropriately. No human subjects were involved, so informed consent is not applicable. Given the politically sensitive context, care is taken to report findings accurately without causing harm to individuals or communities.

3.6 Case Study 1 COVID 19 Response (Baseline of Success)

This section documents the IRCE's response to COVID-19 as a positive control case. The pandemic constituted an exogenous, non-partisan threat. The IRCE demonstrated high collective action across all five analytical criteria, establishing a baseline against which the endogenous conflict cases are compared.

a. Timeline of IRCE Actions

Ethiopia confirmed its first COVID-19 case on 13 March 2020 (Xinhua News Agency, 2020). The government established a National Ministerial Committee and intensified consultations with religious leaders, recognizing faith institutions as essential channels for public health messaging (Oqubay, 2020).

March 2020, Suspension of religious services

On 31 March 2020, the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council closed all mosques and suspended prayers (Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council, 2020). On 1 April 2020, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church suspended all services, instructing followers to pray from home (Addis Standard, 2020). The remaining five IRCE member institutions issued similar directives within days.

April 2020, Joint statement and national prayer campaign

On 4 April 2020, the IRCE declared a month-long national prayer campaign, broadcast on state television. The President attended the launch, commending religious institutions for their contribution to national containment efforts (United Religions Initiative, 2020).

2021, Vaccine advocacy

When vaccines became available, IRCE members publicly received vaccinations to build trust. A qualitative study of 21 faith leaders confirmed that they “effectively collaborat[ed] with government and health professionals in COVID-19 prevention activities” (Yibeltal et al., 2024, p. 5).

b. Evidence of Collective Action

All seven members complied. Every IRCE member suspended in-person worship and participated in the national prayer campaign. This near-simultaneous action across Orthodox, Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical traditions—representing approximately 97% of Ethiopia's population demonstrated unprecedented coordination.

No public dissent. Despite extraordinary measures (suspending Holy Communion during Lent, closing mosques during Ramadan), no significant public dissent emerged from within religious institutions. The Orthodox Church's request to loosen gathering restrictions for Easter was denied; the Church complied without public conflict (Addis Standard, 2020).

High public compliance

Millions of Orthodox Christians commemorated Good Friday from home. Daily prayers were broadcast on state television and followed from home rather than in churches or mosques (AMECEA, 2020).

c. Mechanisms of Success

Four mechanisms enabled collective action:

Neutral threat

COVID-19 infected all ethnic, religious, and political groups indiscriminately. Faith leaders framed the pandemic as a common enemy requiring collective response, preserving their moral authority.

State partnership

The government actively sought IRCE collaboration, providing a clear legal framework (state of emergency declared 8 April 2020) while the IRCE legitimized health directives. The state was a partner, not a protagonist.

Clear goals

Objectives stop spread, encourage vaccination, maintain spiritual life through alternative worship were unambiguous, measurable, and positive-sum.

Health and People Respond Moral authority intact

Because the threat was non-partisan, religious leaders were not accused of favouring any ethnic or political faction. Their message integrating spiritual values with scientific advice appealed to both religious conviction and practical reason.

d. Summary

The COVID-19 case demonstrates that the IRCE is capable of high collective action when facing an exogenous, non-partisan threat. The virus's neutrality, the state's role as partner, the clarity of public health goals, and the preservation of religious leaders' moral authority all contributed to a coordinated, effective response. This baseline provides a sharp contrast to the fragmented responses observed in Ethiopia's ethnic conflicts, to which the analysis now turns.

5: Case Study 2 – Tigray Conflict (Test Case 1)

The Tigray war provides the first critical test of the paper's central argument. Unlike the exogenous COVID-19 threat, the Tigray war constituted an endogenous, partisan threat rooted in zero-sum competition over political power, territory, and ethnic identity. The IRCE's response fragmented, confirming the argument.

3.7 Conflict Overview

The Tigray war erupted in November 2020 when federal forces launched a military offensive against the Tigray regional government after the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) attacked a federal army command (International Crisis Group, 2021). The two-year war involved Ethiopian federal forces, Eritrean troops, and Amhara regional militias. Estimated fatalities reached approximately 600,000 (D+C, 2026). A cessation of hostilities agreement signed in Pretoria on 2 November 2022 formally ended large-scale fighting, but as of 2026, state authority in Tigray remains fragmented.

3.8 IRCE Response

Delayed, weak statements

The IRCE issued a statement on 3 November 2020 calling for negotiation, but subsequent statements remained generic. On 2 September 2021, the council called for "inclusive, independent and open dialogue" and declared five days of "silence and prayer" (The Reporter

Ethiopia, 2021). Notably, the IRCE organized solidarity visits to Amhara and Afar regions but explicitly deferred visiting Tigray “until the area is stable” (Oikoumene, 2020).
Orthodox Church internal schism

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church split along ethnic lines. Tigrayan clergy cut ties with the Addis-based Holy Synod, accusing it of failing to condemn the war. In 2023, Tigrayan clergy formed a separate synod the See of Selama Kessate Berhan Archdiocese and were excommunicated by the Addis synod. The patriarch, Abune Mathias (an ethnic Tigrayan), condemned the war as “genocide” and was placed under virtual house arrest (The Guardian, 2025).

Limited mediation attempts

The Holy Synod established a Peace Committee in May 2023 and pledged humanitarian aid, but a delegation led by Patriarch Abune Mathias travelled to Mekelle in July 2023 and was unable to secure a face-to-face meeting with Tigrayan church leaders. The IRCE itself conducted no documented mediation between federal forces and TPLF.

a. Mechanisms of Fragmentation

Three mechanisms explain the IRCE’s failure, mirroring the inverse of COVID-19 success conditions:

Endogenous threat

The war pitted Ethiopian against Ethiopian with no common enemy. Any statement condemning violence risked being interpreted as favouring one side, making unified collective action impossible.

Church leaders’ ethnic identities exposed

The patriarch’s Tigrayan ethnicity and his genocide accusation against the government destroyed any claim to neutrality. The government’s response house arrest, arrest of his staff signalled that religious leaders who spoke critically would face consequences.

State as protagonist, not partner

During COVID-19, the government was a partner. During the Tigray war, the government was the primary belligerent. The IRCE could not plausibly mediate when one party was the state itself, and when the state had demonstrated willingness to suppress religious dissent.

b. Summary

The Tigray war confirms the paper’s central argument. An exogenous threat enabled collective action; an endogenous, partisan threat produced fragmentation. The Orthodox Church’s internal schism, exposure of leaders’ ethnic identities, and the state’s transformation from partner to protagonist collectively undermined the IRCE’s capacity to act as a unified peacebuilding force.

IV. Results and Discussion

The Oromo conflict provides the second replication test. Like the Tigray war, the Oromo insurgency is an endogenous, partisan threat rooted in long-standing grievances over political marginalization, self-determination, and resource distribution. The IRCE’s response mirrored the Tigray case: minimal public engagement, no sustained mediation, and fragmentation driven by dual pressure on Oromo religious leaders.

4.1 Conflict Overview

The Oromo conflict began in 1973 with the formation of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). After the 2018 political transition, the OLF renounced armed struggle, but a splinter group the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) continued fighting federal forces (Genocide Watch, 2026). The OLA seeks greater autonomy for the Oromo people, Ethiopia's largest ethnic group (approximately 40 million). The conflict has been characterized by abuses on both sides: extrajudicial killings, drone strikes, and massacres of civilians. A December 2024 peace agreement with one OLA faction reduced confrontations by 60%, but a second faction continues fighting (ACLED, 2025).

4.2 IRCE Response

Minimal public engagement

The IRCE issued no specific statements naming the OLA, calling for a ceasefire, or offering mediation proposals tailored to the Oromo insurgency. General peace appeals mentioned "all conflicts" without differentiation.

No sustained mediation

There is no documented evidence of IRCE-led mediation between the government and OLA factions. The December 2024 peace agreement was negotiated by political and security officials, not religious actors.

Muslim leaders' reluctance

Approximately 40–45% of Oromo are Muslim. The Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) has been accused of government co-optation, with critics alleging that the Prime Minister installed an ethnic Oromo as its head (Mereja Forum, 2025). Oromo Muslim religious leaders face dual pressure: speaking against government operations risks detention as an OLA sympathizer; speaking against OLA risks alienating community members. Most have chosen silence.

4.3 Mechanisms of Fragmentation

Dual pressure on Oromo religious leaders: Leaders cannot credibly claim neutrality because the conflict directly implicates their ethnic community. Any condemnation of government violence risks sedition charges; any condemnation of OLA risks alienating supporters.

IRCE consensus requirement: The council operates by consensus among seven member institutions. Oromo Orthodox and Muslim members have been unwilling or unable to support collective action. An Oromo Orthodox breakaway synod, formed in 2023, has challenged the Addis-based Holy Synod, demanding greater autonomy and use of the Afaan Oromo language (The Africa Report, 2024). This internal schism mirrors the broader political conflict.

Conflict framed as political, not moral: The OLA's demands self-determination, constitutional reform, territorial rights are irreducibly political. The IRCE has no mandate, expertise, or leverage in these domains. Religious leaders cannot resolve constitutional disputes through moral suasion alone.

4.4 Conflict Overview

The immediate catalyst was the federal government's April 2023 directive to disband all regional Special Forces, including the Amhara Special Forces. Amhara political elites and the Fano militias interpreted this as a political action designed to dismantle the only organized body

capable of protecting Amhara communities from attacks by TPLF and Oromo militias (DefenceWeb, 2025). The directive triggered mass protests, and Special Forces members fled barracks to join Fano. The conflict rapidly escalated into a full-scale insurgency by August 2023. The government declared a state of emergency on 4 August 2023. As of 2026, over 600,000 people have been displaced, and documented civilian casualties exceeded 5,000 (Amhara Association of America, 2025).

4.5 IRCE Response

Minimal, generic public statements: The IRCE issued no specific statements addressing the Amhara conflict no condemnation of drone strikes on civilian areas, no ceasefire call, no mediation offer. The council’s general peace appeals did not name parties or locations.

Ethiopian Orthodox Church internal paralysis: The Orthodox Church, whose clergy are predominantly Amhara, has been paralyzed by institutional ties to the state. The Holy Synod in Addis Ababa has historically aligned with the political establishment and has been reluctant to criticise government operations, even when drone strikes kill Amhara civilians. For Amhara nationalists, this has rendered the church complicit. For the government, any church statement sympathetic to Fano risks being labelled seditious.

Absence of mediation: No documented IRCE-led mediation efforts exist. The December 2025 “peace agreement” between the Amhara Regional Government and a factional leader (Captain Masresha Setie) was negotiated by political officials and collapsed within weeks because Setie did not represent the broader Fano movement.

4.6 Mechanisms of Fragmentation

Endogenous, partisan threat with no common enemy: The war pits former allies against one another. Zero-sum goals (territory, political power, security) defy simple moral solutions. Ethnic identity of religious leaders exposed: Orthodox clergy share ethnicity with both Fano fighters and (largely) government forces. The church’s institutional ties to the state, however, prevent it from speaking critically. Drone strikes that have hit churches and killed priests have further eroded moral authority.

State as protagonist: The ENDF has conducted large-scale military operations, declared states of emergency, and arrested thousands of Amhara politicians and militia personnel. The IRCE cannot mediate when the state is the primary belligerent and has demonstrated willingness to suppress dissent.

Fragmented insurgency: Fano comprises multiple autonomous militias with no central command. Even if the IRCE were willing to mediate, there is no single interlocutor. The collapsed December 2025 agreement illustrates this problem.

4.7 Cross Case Comparison Matrix

Table 3: Comparison matrix analysis

Variable	COVID-19	Tigray	Oromo	Amhara	Gurage
Threat type	Exogenous	Endogenous	Endogenous	Endogenous	Endogenous
IRCE collective action	High	Low	Low	Very low	Very low

Religious leader neutrality	High	Low	Low	Low	Low
State role	Partner	Protagonist	Protagonist	Protagonist	Protagonist
Goal clarity	High (positive-sum)	Low (zero-sum)	Low (zero-sum)	Low (zero-sum)	Low (zero-sum)
Outcome	Success	Failure	Failure	Failure	Failure

The matrix reveals a stark, consistent pattern. The exogenous threat produced high collective action and success. All four endogenous conflicts produced fragmentation and failure.

4.8 Causal Mechanisms

Four interconnected mechanisms link threat type to outcomes:

Mechanism 1: Threat type → Neutrality. Exogenous threats preserve perceived neutrality because the threat itself is non-partisan. Endogenous threats destroy neutrality because the threat originates from within society and is rooted in partisan grievances. Religious leaders share ethnic identities with their congregants, and those congregants are aligned with one side of the conflict. The Orthodox Church’s internal schism (Tigray) and the Oromo breakaway synod exemplify this.

Mechanism 2: Neutrality → Collective action. When religious leaders are perceived as neutral, they can coordinate across institutional divides. The IRCE’s seven members united during COVID-19 because none faced a credibility deficit. When neutrality is lost, collective action becomes impossible. The IRCE’s consensus governance structure, an asset during the pandemic becomes a liability when members are ethnically divided.

Mechanism 3: State role. During COVID-19, the government was a partner. In all four conflicts, the state was a protagonist indeed, the primary belligerent. The IRCE cannot plausibly mediate when one party is the state itself and when the state has demonstrated willingness to suppress religious leaders who speak critically (e.g., house arrest of Patriarch Abune Mathias).

Mechanism 4: Goal structure. COVID-19 involved positive-sum goals (stopping the virus benefited everyone). The conflicts involve zero-sum goals: territory, administrative boundaries, and political power. Zero-sum goals are not amenable to moral suasion alone. Religious leaders cannot resolve constitutional disputes or compel armed groups to disarm.

4.9 Negative Cases: Local Successes

The IRCE’s failure at the national level does not mean religious peacebuilding is never effective. Local successes exist under specific scope conditions.

The IRCE’s Local Peace Committees in Nagale Arsi and Dodola (Oromia) successfully resolved intra-faith power struggles and organized dialogue forums (Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, 2024). More notably, Ethiopia’s traditional indigenous peace custodians the Aba Gars have demonstrated remarkable success. A United Nations report documented how Aba Gars in northern Ethiopia rebuilt trust, restored dialogue, revived markets, and resolved disputes after the recent conflict (United Nations Ethiopia, 2026). In Raya Chercher, Aba Gars created space for a joint peace conference between Tigray and Afar communities the first formal engagement since the war.

Three scope conditions for success emerge:

Localization: Success occurs at the local level, where conflicts involve discrete, manageable issues and where religious leaders are known personally to disputants.

State non-interference or support: In local successes, the state was either absent or supportive not the protagonist.

Integration of traditional authority: The Aba Gars system, blending indigenous mediation with spiritual authority, has proven more effective than the formal IRCE structure in grassroots contexts.

V. Conclusion

This section draws out the theoretical contributions, assesses generalizability, derives policy implications, and addresses foundational weaknesses of the IRCE.

Theoretical Contributions

Extending collective action theory to religious institutions: Ostrom's (1990, 2005) framework has rarely been applied to religious institutions. This paper shows that the success or failure of religious collective action depends critically on threat type. The IRCE's consensus governance operated as an asset during COVID 19 because all members perceived the same threat and agreed on the response. That same structure became a liability during ethnic conflicts because members were ethnically divided. Future applications of Ostrom's framework should incorporate threat type as an exogenous variable.

Introducing threat type as a key variable for religious peacebuilding: The literature has emphasized moral authority as a resource for peacebuilding (Appleby, 2000; Smock, 2006). This paper demonstrates that moral authority is conditional on the perceived neutrality of religious actors, and neutrality is conditional on threat structure. An exogenous threat allows religious leaders to stand above the fray; an endogenous threat embeds them within it. The question for future research is not "Do religious actors contribute to peace?" but "Under what structural conditions can they contribute?"

Challenging the assumption that moral authority alone enables mediation. The Ethiopian case shows that the same moral authority that persuaded millions to suspend worship during COVID 19 was entirely insufficient to mediate ethnic conflicts. The Orthodox patriarch could not mediate the Tigray war because his ethnic identity and his condemnation of the government placed him under house arrest. Moral authority is not free standing; it is conditional on neutrality, and neutrality is destroyed by endogenous, partisan threats.

Generalizability to Other Contexts

The findings are likely to generalize to other multi ethnic, federal states where religious institutions coexist with ethnic cleavages and the state is a protagonist in internal conflicts.

Nigeria: The Inter Religious Council of Nigeria (NIREC) has had success in health campaigns but has been largely ineffective in addressing the Boko Haram insurgency and ethnoreligious violence in the Middle Belt. The same dynamics endogenous threats, state as belligerent, zero sum goals likely explain NIREC's limited effectiveness (Haynes, 2019).

Myanmar: The State Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka Committee (Buddhist monks) has fragmented along ethnic and political lines since the 2021 coup. Monks have been divided between

supporters and opponents of the military junta. Here again, an endogenous, partisan threat (civil war) has fragmented religious authority, and the state is a protagonist.

India and Pakistan: Inter religious councils have mediated occasional communal riots but have been largely ineffective in addressing Hindu–Muslim polarisation under majoritarian politics (India) or systemic discrimination against religious minorities (Pakistan). The zero sum nature of identity claims leaves little room for moral suasion.

More broadly, religious councils face systematic constraints in civil war settings. Where they have been effective (e.g., Sant’Egidio in Mozambique, Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiative in Uganda), conditions approximated the scope conditions identified in Section 8.3: localisation, state non interference, and integration with traditional authority systems (Bartoli, 2019).

Policy Implications

Donors should not assume religious councils can mediate civil wars without structural support. International donors have invested substantially in inter religious councils as peacebuilding actors. This paper’s findings suggest such assumptions are over optimistic in civil war contexts. Donors should provide protection mechanisms for religious leaders who speak out, conflict sensitivity training that addresses ethnic identity, linkages with traditional peace custodians, and multi track diplomacy that combines religious mediation with political negotiation.

Need for ethnic de escalation within religious bodies before external mediation. The IRCE’s fragmentation reflected pre existing ethnic divisions within religious institutions themselves. Before religious councils can credibly mediate ethnic conflicts, they must address internal ethnic disparities, power asymmetries, and representation gaps. This includes internal peacebuilding processes, cross ethnic dialogue among leaders, and institutional reforms ensuring no single ethnic group dominates leadership.

Support local, traditional peace custodians during active conflict. During active civil wars, national level inter religious bodies may be paralysed. Donors should invest in local peace committees (like the IRCE’s Local Peace Committees), support traditional indigenous peace custodians (Aba Gars), and facilitate track three diplomacy that connects local peacebuilders to national mediation efforts without requiring them to speak through a single, potentially paralysed national council.

Foundational Weaknesses of the IRCE

The IRCE’s failure cannot be explained solely by situational factors. Foundational institutional weaknesses compound the problem:

Government establishment and state registration: The IRCE was registered with the Ministry of Federal Affairs and acknowledges being “supported and empowered by government policy” (Talk About: Law and Religion, 2023). An institution that owes its legal existence to state registration cannot credibly challenge that state when it becomes a conflict protagonist.

Co optation of leaders into the ruling party: Many prominent religious leaders are active members or allies of the ruling Prosperity Party. The Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council has been accused of having its leadership “manipulated” by the government (Mereja Forum,

2025). Religious leaders appear “as accomplices of the state among groups that they try to address with their message of peace” (Steen Johnsen, 2017, p. 145).

Abandonment of religious doctrine: Ethiopian religious traditions unanimously condemn unjust killing and oppression. Yet during the conflicts, religious leaders remained largely silent as thousands of civilians were killed. Religious leaders have “failed to make a substantial contribution to peace by evoking love but avoiding questions of justice” (Steen Johnsen, 2020, p. 10).

Financial dependency and loss of public trust: The IRCE relies on government and donor funding, constraining its ability to speak critically. A study of the IRCE’s peacebuilding programme found “scepticism of religious leaders” and “lack of public trust” (T’sion, 2022, p. 34).

Exclusion of indigenous peace traditions: The IRCE has largely ignored Ethiopia’s rich indigenous peace systems (Aba Gars), modelled instead on Western inter faith dialogue frameworks (Mekonnen, 2024).

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