A Close Look at Abiy's Charismatic Leadership in Ethiopia

Henok Jemal Aman[1, *], Mulat Abebel Reta[2]

Africa Leadership Excellence Academy, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Email address:
rashenok4@gmail.com (H. J. Aman), mulatabebel12@gmail.com (M. A. Reta)
[*]Corresponding author

Abstract: Charisma is a Greek term that means "gift". The word charisma used in the Christian bible to express several Devine gifts. The discussion of charismatic leadership in organizations began with Max Weber, who used the word charismatic to secular application. One of the most challenging issues in studying charismatic leadership is the lack of agreement on its definition. Academicians characterized charismatic leadership in several ways, and there is no consensus on which description is the most exhaustive. The distinguishing qualities of charismatic leadership may be perceived from two angles: leader behaviors and follower impacts. In the early years of Abiy's leadership, he demonstrated some characteristics of charismatic leaders such as rhetorical ability, motivational power, and graceful figure. In addition, there was some indication of a risk-taking personality, a revolutionary attempt, and a vision in his first year. However, there is a counter-argument for this, especially his lack of consistency made him susceptible to skeptics. His self-centered leadership style, lack of paradigm-shifting decisions, inability to put into action his visions, and lack of ethics were some of the counter-arguments against his charismatic nature. Nonetheless, it is premature to forward conclusive evidence to claim whether he is a charismatic leader or not.

Keywords: Charisma, Leadership, Abiy's Leadership

1. Introduction

Despite the existence of many charismatic leaders in human history and the ideas regarding it have been the center of hot discussion and debate for centuries, academic literature regarding the concept and practice of charismatic leadership is not abundant as one expects. Several reasons may contribute to the deficiency of research and many scholars forwarded their justifications. However, Willner condensed the possible reasons into three; according to her, the first reason why researchers have refused to study charismatic leadership is that it is elusive and the term is mystical. Second, without a systematic conceptual framework, researchers have often had difficulty defining and operationalizing charisma and identifying the variables that influence its development. Third, it is difficult to gain access to charismatic corporate leaders [1].

One of the defining features of the contemporary world system is competition. The general scarcity of economic resources and the intense Darwinian rivalry forces actors to be efficient in the use of resources to be competent. The resources required for the effective functioning of any organization are invisible and visible. From invisible resources, human resources are becoming more and more important for the survival, growth, and development of organizations. To be a major source of competitive advantage, human resources must be managed proactively. These emphasize the need for a leader with the charisma, knowledge, skills, and abilities to lead employees to achieve the company's mission, vision, and goals [2].

As it is noted in Conger and Kanungo, many researchers concluded that Charisma is a vital quality of leaders who serve as change agents or play transformational roles [3]. Charismatic leaders motivate and encourage followers to commit to an objective. They fit well in an environment where people require the presence of an individual able of driving and changing the status quo [4]. Nonetheless, before diving into the detailed discussion of the concepts pertaining to charismatic leadership, it is better to differentiate the notion of managers and leaders first. Conger and Kanungo [3], distinguished and listed the characteristics of leaders and

managers in the following table:

Table 1. Comparing Manager-ship and Leadership.

	Manager-ship	Leadership
1	Engages in day-to-day activities: Maintains and allocates resources.	Formulates long-term objectives for reforming the system: Plans strategy and tactics.
2	Exhibits supervisory behavior: Acts to make others maintain standard job behavior.	Exhibits leading behavior: Acts to bring about change in others congruent with long-term objectives.
3	Administers subsystems within organizations.	Innovates for the entire organization.
4	Asks how and when to engage in standard practice.	Asks when and why to change standard practice.
5	Acts within the established culture of the organization.	Creates vision and meaning for the organization and strives to transform culture.
6	Uses transactional influence: Induces compliance in manifest behavior using rewards, sanctions, and formal authority.	Uses transformational influence: Induces change in values, attitudes, and behavior using personal examples and expertise.
7	Relies on control strategies to get things done by subordinates.	Uses empowering strategies to make followers internalize values
8	Supports the status quo and stabilizes the organization.	Challenges the status quo and creates change.

Besides the aforementioned qualities, it is also possible to mention other features that can distinguish the two concepts. However, the important note here is to understand the existence of conceptual and practical differences. The main reason to separate the idea of managers and leaders is that it is crucial in the understanding of charismatic leaders as the two play different roles. Nevertheless, it is not correct to assume managers and leaders as separate types of people: individuals can embody both roles [3].

The concept of charismatic leadership is comprehensive and includes a variety of leaders' attributes. It is utterly significant not to associate it only with specific characters. House and Howell described the diversity of charismatic leaders in the following matter:-

The term charismatic has been applied to very diverse leaders emerging in political arenas (Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Fidel Castro, Franklin Delano Roosevelt), in religious movements (Jesus Christ, Jim Jones), in social movement organizations (Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X), and in business organizations (Lee Iacocca, Steven Jobs, Ross Johnson, Mary Kay Ash). Clearly, charisma is a broadly applied term that does not distinguish between good or moral and evil or immoral leadership [5].

As noted in Conger and Kanungo, the existing body of research segmented the analysis of charismatic leaders into (1) behavioral dimensions of the charismatic leader, (2) the psychological characteristics or dispositions of charismatic leaders, and (3) the institutionalization of charisma [3]. This review will focus on the behavioral and psychological characteristics or dispositions of charismatic leaders.

2. Concepts of Charismatic Leadership

It is widely accepted that leadership plays a paramount role in the formation, survival, development, and decline of organizations. Equally having and not having charismatic leadership is detrimental to both the success and failure of any entity. Originally, Charisma is a Greek word meaning Present. Within the Christian bible, the term Charisma is utilized on a few occasions such as within the letter of St. Paul—Romans, Chapter 12 and 1 Corinthians, Chapter 12. The book of scriptures used the word to assign the Holy Spirit. The usage of Charisma within the book of scriptures is to portray blessings such as "Prophecy, ruling, teaching, ministry,

wisdom, and healing [6].

Though the usage of charisma is old, the discussion of charismatic leadership in organizations must begin with a German sociologist, Max Weber, who applied the term charismatic to leaders in the secular world. He is the first one who secularly and scientifically tries to articulate the concept of charismatic leadership in firms. His typology of three types of authority in society (the traditional, the legally rational, and the charismatic) established charismatic leadership as an important term to describe forms of authority based on the perception of an exceptional individual [10]. His contribution has laid the foundation for successive scholars.

One of the challenging tasks in charismatic leadership study is the lack of agreement regarding its meaning. Different academicians' defined charismatic leadership differently and there is no agreement about which definition is the most comprehensive. According to House and Howell, charismatic leadership is about forming a collective identity, for them, such leaders change the wants, values, inclinations, and yearnings of followers from self-interest to the collective interest [5]. In addition, they cause followers to end up exceedingly committed to the leader's mission, to form critical individual penances within the intrigued of the mission, and to perform over and pass the expectation.

Others see charismatic leaders from the perspective of personal ability to affect others. For instance, charismatic leaders as House & Baetz claim are "by the force of their personal abilities are capable of having profound and extraordinary effects on followers" [7]. Similarly, Yukl defined it as "The process of influencing major changes in the attitudes and assumptions of organization members and building commitment for the organization's objectives" [8]. Other scholars similarly understand it from the viewpoint of influencing followers, for Nikoloski charismatic leader is "one that has influence, inspires, motivates and instills confidence among followers" [2]. Kouzes and Posner defined it as "Leadership that has a magnetic effect on people" [9].

Some works of literature attribute the influence of charismatic leaders to divinity or extraordinary power. For instance, the "Great Man Theory of Leadership" claims that by the virtue of their greatness charismatic leaders can influence their followers toward the desired goal which non-great leaders are incapable to do so [7]. For Willner, followers perceive charismatic leaders as individuals endowed

with superhuman qualities who obey the commands and directives of those leaders [1].

From the above definitions, it is possible to point out that the central character of charismatic leadership is its influence on others/ followers to attain a certain goal. Several empirical researches attempted to see the effects of such leaders. According to Conger and Kanungo, the findings of the studies have shown that leaders who are perceived as charismatic "receive higher performance ratings, are seen as more effective leaders than others holding a leadership position, and have more highly motivated and more satisfied followers than others in similar positions" [3].

3. Characteristics/Indicators of Charismatic Leadership

The nucleus of the study of charismatic leadership understands what makes a certain person a charismatic leader. What are the qualities that are attributed to charismatic leadership? What are the unique characteristics of charismatic leaders that distinguish them from other leaders? Answering such questions has been the most challenging and controversial issue in the academic discussion of charismatic leadership. Based on various works of literature many political scientists and sociologists have attempted to define the central character of charismatic leaders throughout history. In their transformational model of leadership Bass and Avolio identified charismatic leadership as one behavioral component of transformational leadership. For them, the four behavioral components of the leaders are (1) charisma or idealized influence, (2) inspiration, (3) intellectual stimulation, and (4) individualized consideration [10]. Charisma is a separate component for them.

The salient feature of charismatic leadership can be seen from two perspectives: leader behaviors and follower effects. For Scholars like Willner, the perceptions of followers have paramount importance to identify someone as a charismatic leader. Willner concluded from in-depth case studies that charismatic leadership was mostly relational and perceptual, rather than personality-based or contextually determined: "It is not what the leader is but what people see the leader as that counts in generating the charismatic relationship" [1].

Literatures suggest that the fundamental quality of charismatic leadership is his/her ability to influence the attitude, behavior, and action of his/her followers toward some ideal goal. House for instance sees it as a motivation of others to complete work more effectively. The charismatic leader can drive high levels of work completion by using emotionally appealing goals and demonstrating actions that stimulate followers' own needs for achievement, loyalty, and power [11]. One way of motivating followers is to inspire their self-concept for the desired outcome. This simply means altering the human drive to establish and reinforce a sense of personal by the leaders for common good.

Followers of charismatic leaders will begin to perceive their organizational duties as inextricably linked to their self-concepts. The charismatic leader employs a variety of strategies to achieve this shift in job perceptions. According to Shamir and colleagues, to this end, one of the most essential elements is the leader's vision. This serves to improve followers' self-concepts in three ways: The vision increases the significance of the organization's objectives by presenting a hopeful and enticing future. Second, the vision is expressed as a collective one, fostering a strong sense of community. The charismatic leader distinguishes his or her followers from others by emphasizing that the vision is the foundation for the group's identity, and by emphasizing that the vision is the basis for the group's identity, the charismatic leader further encourages followers to transcend their limitations [12].

Some literatures see charismatic leadership from the perspective of the leader's behavior. Conger and Kanungo summarized this as a capability to do things such as "a transcendent vision and/or ideology, acts of heroism, an ability to inspire and build confidence, the expression of revolutionary and often "hazardous" ideals, rhetorical ability, and a powerful aura" [6]. They further listed out the behavioral salient features of charismatic leaders against non-charismatic ones as follows:

Behavioral components of Non-charismatic and Charismatic Leaders.

Table 2. Comparison of Charismatic and Non-Charismatic Leaders.

	Non-charismatic Leader	Charismatic Leader
Relation to status quo	Essentially agrees with status quo and strives to maintain it	Essentially opposed with status quo and strive to change it
Future Goal	Goal not too discrepant from status quo	Idealized vision which is highly discrepant from status quo
Likableness	Shared perspectives make him/her likable	Shared perspectives idealized vision makes him/her a likable and honorable hero worthy of identification and imitation
Trustworthiness	Disinterested advocacy in persuasion attempts	Disinterested advocacy by incurring great personal risk and cost
Expertise	Expert in using available means to achieve goals within the framework of existing order	Expert in using unconventional means to transcend the existing order
Behavior	Conventional conforming to existing norms	Unconventional or counter normative
Environmental Sensitivity	Low need for environmental sensitivity to maintain status quo	high need for environmental sensitivity for changing the status quo
Articulation	Weak articulation of goals and motivation to lead	Strong articulation of future vision and motivation to lead
Power Base	Position power and personal power (based on reward, expertise, and liking for a friends who is a similar other)	Personal power (based on expertise, respect, and admiration for unique hero)
Leader-Follower Relationship	Egalitarian, consensus seeking or directive	Elitist, Entrepreneur, and exemplary
	Nudges or orders people to share his/her views	Transform people to share the radical changes advocated

Source: Toward a Behavioral Theory of Charismatic Leadership in Organizational Settings by Conger and Kanungo.

The other defining characteristic of charismatic leaders is their tendency to dominate. House claims that charismatic leaders are differentiated from others by their propensity for dominance, a strong belief in their own values and ideals, a desire to influence others, and high self-confidence [11]. They are also revolutionaries. Charismatic leaders are revolutionaries who do not always try to adapt to conventional beliefs, mentality, or attitudes. In the meantime, they guide their followers toward achieving their ambitions by engaging in innovative behaviors that go against the traditional norms of their organizations, businesses, and/or society [6]. Another quality charismatic leaders have is ethics, those leaders with higher ethics are highly effective. Because charismatic leaders with a strong ethical mindset create more positive work environments with lower interpersonal and workplace misbehavior. This is logical because leaders serve as role models, and their actions influence the rest of the organization [2].

According to Penpoin [4], charismatic leadership has the following characteristics:

1. Visionary
2. creative
3. Have a strong personality
4. Humility
5. Risk-takers
6. Self-Monitoring
7. Agent of Change
8. Never gives up
9. Great communicators

By citing different literatures Nikoloski [2], identified three key elements charismatic leaders possess that are more or less similar to Penpoins lists, though Nikoloski's indicators look more comprehensive and brief. The salient feature he identified is:

1. The presence of a vision and purpose.
2. Possesses extraordinary qualities, such as confidence, commitment, moral principles, and faith in one's own ideas.
3. The ability to persuade others.

Charismatic leaders have a strong sense of self-confidence, rhetorical talent, a strong desire for power or influence, and a firm belief in the moral validity of their principles. Because their objective is frequently unorthodox and likely to be opposed by those who have a stake in maintaining the status quo, charismatic leaders must have a high level of self-confidence and moral conviction [11].

In the discussion regarding the indicators of charismatic leaders, scholars advise that it is not prudent to fit all charismatic leaders into a single box. Each charismatic leader may have their own unique characteristic and may not fit fully into the proposed categories. However, for academic and analytical purposes scholars attempt to come up with several divisions and lists of common features shared by the leaders in question. For example, from different literatures House and Howell identified two types of charismatic leaders; personalized (self-aggrandizing, non-egalitarian, and exploitive) charismatic leaders from socialized (collectively oriented, egalitarian, and no exploitive) charismatic leaders [5]. Furthermore, it is also wrongful to assume charismatic leaders as flawless creatures. As noted in Penpoin [4],

Charismatic leadership has both strengths and weaknesses, the strengths of being a charismatic leader are:

1. Become a catalyst for change for the better.
2. Build positive energy.
3. Build a strong commitment among followers.

But, there are also some shortcomings to charismatic leadership and those are the possibilities of:

1. Self-centered.
2. No regeneration.

4. Abiy in the Lenses of Charismatic Leadership

Having extraordinary leaders in Ethiopia is quite a common phenomenon. In Ethiopian history, there are at least half a dozen of great leaders, though whether they fit in the definition of charismatic leadership requires further study. Hailesilasie I is still worshiped as God by Rastafarian, Minilik II has been the symbol of black resistance and pride all over the African continent and Carrabian, Emperor Tewodros II in his ascent from bandit to the king of Ethiopia had proved his heroism and wisdom, Meles Zenawi for long used to be the brightest leader and the face of Africa in multilateral diplomacy.

Many people were surprised when Abiy Ahmed Ali was elected as Ethiopia's third Prime Minister. As seen by a competitive party election and Abiy's surprising road to candidacy, his swift rise can be attributed to chance rather than plan [13]. In his first 100 days in office, Abiy had freed thousands of political prisoners, liberalized the press and freedom of speech, legalized a variety of previously criminalized opposition groups, stamped his mark on Ethiopia's military-security complex, committed the country to genuine multi-party democracy, and put an end to an 18-year-old latent conflict with Eritrea [14]. He is the continent's youngest leader to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

After taking the office Abiy gave an electrifying address to the people, speaking to all segments of Ethiopia's political system. Although it was only discourse, it helped to heal the body and soul of a shattered and overheated polity. Abiy gave motivating remarks in Jigjiga, Ambo, Mekele, Gondar, Hawassa, and Semera, all from the peak of that momentous address. These were admirable efforts to reduce tensions by bridging the gap between Ethiopians and the national-regional divide. He has not only become the rock star of Ethiopian politics, but also a messianic figure, with his hallmark discourse of love and integration, paired with his charismatic persona [13].

From Weldemariam article it is possible to extract 3 qualities of charismatic leadership that Prime Minister Abiy possesses. Literatures suggest that charismatic leaders have unique characteristics such as rhetorical ability, motivational power, and graceful figure [2], which he seems to have possessed. During the initial period of his tenure, he manifested some sort of risk-taking personality. He made pivotal judgments that have wreaked havoc on the status quo. Abiy removed the two most formidable TPLF masterminds in

the country, the army chief of staff (Samora Yunis) and the national intelligence chief (Getachew Assefa), two of Meles' most longstanding and effective enforcers, within weeks of assuming power [14]. Studies show that revolutionary attempt is one indicator of such leaders [6]. On the other hand, the time after 6 months in power, according to critics, has shown no major policy changes. He also appears to show another quality of charisma which is vision. One instance of this is his promise to change on overhauling the federal government [13]. Yet there is no sign of effort so far.

When he came into power, he has able to evoke genuine affection and support from a wide range of people [14]. Winning the heart and mind of the followers is the central aspect of charismatic leadership. And initially, Abiy was successful to gain unprecedented support and admiration from the people. However, even though it is difficult to access an impartially conducted popular approval rating, the current support he has is likely to be declining. He also expected to deliver his original promises like political pluralism, an independent judiciary, and de-securitization of ethnic relations [13]. Abiy's critics claim that he is rapidly reverting to a very individualized approach to governance. Some of his most important policy decisions were taken without consulting other government stakeholders and implemented through ad hoc or informal processes [14]. This self-centered approach according to Penpoin is one of the downsides of charismatic leaders [4].

One of the indicators for charismatic leaders is ethics. Ethics is one of the profound qualities that are expected charismatic leaders to have possessed because leaders are role models and their actions impact their followers [2]. There are no objective measurements to determine the level of someone's ethical standards. However, leaders' ethical values are susceptible to public scrutiny. Naol Befkadu, a lecturer at Baptist theological colleges in Ethiopia and a Ph.D. candidate in evangelical leadership, in his direct letter to PM Abiy stated that the prime minister is "morally unfit and unqualified" and demanded him resign. He listed six justifications as to why the moral fitness of Prime Minister Abiy is questionable [15]. Despite the critics, some literature indicates that it is possible to become a charismatic leader ever disregarding ethical values [5].

Since his stay in power is only 4 years, it is difficult to claim whether he is a charismatic leader or not. Until now he has showed some charismatic and non-charismatic characteristics. Most of the modern leaders of Ethiopia led the country for at least a decade. If Abiy has the opportunity to remain in power for additional years, he may have the possibility to establish himself as a charismatic leader. However, there are not enough evidences to suggest that he is a charismatic leader for the time being or it is premature to give definitive answer.

5. Conclusion

Charisma has been the center of scholarly debate for decades. Though the term charismatic leadership is common among laymen and scholars, it is difficult to come up with a universally accepted definition. Literature suggests that research conducted in this area is relatively small. According to Willner, there are three possible answers for this; one is the vagueness of the concept, the difficulty to theorize and operationalize is the second challenge, and finally, it is hard to access charismatic leaders. Despite the difficulty faced in studying it, the competitive world we live in necessitates such leaders, to survive the competition with effectiveness and efficiency.

Since the 2018 Ethiopian reform, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has been characterized as a charismatic leader within and outside the country. Especially in the initial period of his prime Ministry, he introduces plenty and consecutive reforms which won him the heart and mind of his people and international bodies. For this, he was able to receive the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize. Starting from his inauguration speech, his subsequent measures helped to gain overwhelming popular support and planted the hope of change in the heart of the country.

A significant number of international Media addresses him as the new charismatic leader in Africa. And their attribution was not in vain. This article identified some salient features of charismatic leadership that Prime Minister Abiy may have demonstrated. His rhetorical ability, motivational power, and graceful figure were the least of them. Furthermore, his risk-taking personality, revolutionary attempt, and vision were also demonstrated especially in his early six months in power.

However, there are also counter-arguments to question his charismatic nature in his leadership. His lack of consultation with major stakeholders in decision making, his inability to put into action his visions and promises, and his reluctance to make major paradigm-shifting changes after his first year in power is the main counter-arguments against his charismatic leadership of Abiy. In addition, individuals like Naol Befkadu question the Prime Ministers' ethics from the perspective of protestant ethical values when he handles statecraft. Even though, there is a lack of objective approval rating conducted in Ethiopia, it is apparent that his popularity is declining over time.

Taking into account the lack of extensive research and the period of his stay in power which is only four years, it is difficult to conclusively say whether he is charismatic or not. Compared to other leaders of Ethiopia, the Prime Minister Abiy administration is serving for a few years to judge his success. Though his inconsistency in terms of performance is apparent, he still has time to prove himself. Most importantly, it is premature to characterize him as a charismatic leader at this stage of his administration but through time he has the possibility of establishing himself as a charismatic leader's of Ethiopia.

References

[1] Ann. R Willner, *Charismatic Political Leadership* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

[2] Krume Nikoloski, "Charismatic Leadership and Power: Using the Power of Charisma for Better Leadership in the Enterprises," *Journal of Process Management. New Technologies* 3, no. 2 (2015): 18–26.

[3]   Jay Alden Conger and Rabindra Nath Kanungo, *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.; London: SAGE, 1998), http://sk.sagepub.com/books/charismatic-leadership-in-organi zations.

[4]   Penpoin, "Charismatic Leadership: Meaning, Examples, Characteristics, Pros, Cons -," Penpoin, October 26, 2020, https://penpoin.com/charismatic-leadership/

[5]   Robert J. House and Jane M. Howell, "Personality and Charismatic Leadership," *The Leadership Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1992): 83.

[6]   Jay A. Conger and Rabindra N. Kanungo, "Toward a Behavioral Theory of Charismatic Leadership in Organizational Settings," *Academy of Management Review* 12, no. 4 (1987): 637, https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1987.4306715.

[7]   E. F Borgatta, A. S. Couch, and R. F Bales, "Some Findings Relevant to the Great Man Theory of Leadership," *Merican Sociological Review,* 19 (1954): 399.

[8]   Gary Yukl, "How Leaders Influence Organizational Effectiveness," *The Leadership Quarterly* 19, no. 6 (2008): 207, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2008.09.008.

[9]   James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 3rd ed., vol. 3 (John Wiley & Sons, 2006), 123.

[10]   Bernard M. Bass and Bruce J. Avolio, "Transformational Leadership: A Response to Critiques.," 1993, 49–80.

[11]   Robert J. House, "A 1976 Theory of Charismatic Leadership. Working Paper Series 76-06.," *Southern Illinois University Press*, 1976, 189–207.

[12]   Boas Shamir, Robert J. House, and Michael B. Arthur, "The Motivational Effects of Charismatic Leadership: A Self-Concept Based Theory," *Organization Science* 4, no. 4 (1993): 577–94, https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.4.4.577.

[13]   Alemayehu Weldemariam, "Ethiopia's Charismatic Leader: Riding the Wave of Populism or Reforming Ethnic Federalism?," *Ethiopia Observer* (blog), July 4, 2018, https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2018/07/04/ethiopias-chari smatic-leader-riding-the-wave-of-populism-or-reforming-ethni c-federalism/.

[14]   Jonathan Fisher, "Abiy Ahmed's Surprising Leadership in Ethiopia | ISPI," Italian Institute for International Political Studies, October 11, 2019, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/abiy-ahmeds-surprisin g-leadership-ethiopia-23969.

[15]   Naol Befkadu, "Ethiopia: Fellow Evangelical Finds PM Abiy 'Morally Unfit and Unqualified,'" The Africa Report, October 12, 2021, https://www.theafricareport.com/135123/ethiopia-fellow-evan gelical-finds-pm-abiy-morally-unfit-and-unqualified/.