

CHAPTER FOUR

ETHNIC POLITICS IN PLAY: IMPLEMENTING SELF-DETERMINATION IN A SOUTH ETHIOPIAN CONTEXT

Chapter 2 of this book focused on the national macro level, where Ethiopian state policies and ideologies are formulated. Due to the federal nature of the Ethiopian polity, the macro level encompasses another arena as well, that of the regional states. According to the Ethiopian Constitution, regional states have autonomy to prepare and implement their own state policies and to conduct their own affairs independent of the actors at the national level. The constitutional right to regional autonomy in Ethiopia is nevertheless severely restricted by national institutional, financial, and central party constraints. The regional state actors are therefore heavily dependent on decisions made by political actors at the national level, and the regional implementation of state policies is coloured by national ideological and pragmatic concerns. Hence, the policies in the regions are also shaped by the EPRDF's inherently contradictory idea about ethnicity: the notion that although ethnic identities are primordially defined, ethnic political mobilisation is not an aim in itself, but essentially an instrument that the ruling party can use to reach the end goal of controlling the state.

Still, the context of each region strongly influences how ethnic federalism operates, as we will see with respect to the Southern region, the SNNPRS. Although the national political actor, the EPRDF, came to the area intending to 'liberate' the nationalities of the south, new southern elites, created and instructed by the EPRDF, gradually adapted the concepts of national self-determination to fit their own contexts. The analysis of the national political framework in the Southern region therefore needs a wider scope than suggested by the institutional approach to ethnic diversity management presented in chapter 1. It is not sufficient to focus on the design and functions of institutions: the wider context of history, informal institutions, and power politics must be taken into account.

The EPRDF's arrival in the south

When the EPRDF moved southward from Addis Ababa with its forces in 1991, its main message to the southern peoples was that it came to liberate the nationalities from the oppressive Derg regime. Its leaders proclaimed that all ethnically defined communities should be allowed to govern themselves, use their own languages, and promote their own cultural practices.

Although it took some time before the new leadership managed to gain complete control of the vast territory of the Southern region, they managed relatively quickly to fill the power vacuum left by the Derg. Within the first few years, the initial peace and security committees of local elders and community leaders were replaced by political parties based on nationality (ethnic group), created by and allied with the EPRDF. Most of these parties were led by former soldiers of the Derg from the south, who had been captured and trained by the Tigray People's Liberation Front in the north in the last years of the war against the Derg (J. Young 1998). They had arrived together with the EPRDF forces and worked to open doors in their respective communities with their knowledge of the language and politics of each nationality. Because of these connections, the EPRDF managed to win the trust of the local population to some extent. But the presence of Tigrayan cadres in almost every zone and in some *woreda* in the first years of the new regime, and the fact that many of the new local cadres were young, uneducated, and inexperienced, made it difficult for the ruling party to gain legitimacy among the traditional and educated elites.

Changes and continuities

As pointed out by Donham, the emergence of the EPRDF in the peripheries of Ethiopia represented both changes from and continuities with the previous regimes. An apparent, but perhaps not deep or genuine, difference between the old and new regimes was that the EPRDF abandoned Marxism and socialism as ideological guides and adopted the modern rhetoric of democracy and human rights to legitimise its actions. But this did not prevent the EPRDF from continuing one of the Derg's main projects for the Ethiopian state: 'capturing the citizens', or *encadrement*, incorporating every member of the community into its structures of control (Donham 2002, 154). The EPRDF's execution of this project was even more comprehensive than the Derg's