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Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia

— Part I —

Transforming a Political Landscape

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia

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By Marc Michaelson

"The process of democratisation in Ethiopia has certainly begun to take hold but democracy is a social culture and not just a system of governance. The culture of democracy has been lacking in Ethiopia and will take time to develop as people assume the responsibility for their own destiny..."

—Office of the Ethiopian Government Spokesperson¹

In the shadow of late-1980s early-1990s global political turmoil — the collapse of the Soviet empire and the unraveling of the iron curtain in Eastern Europe — profound changes in the Horn of Africa went largely unnoticed. The Sudanese civil war intensified and Somalia plunged into chaotic clan-based violence, coining the term "failed state." And, in a quiet but dramatic revolution in Ethiopia, a coalition of liberation movements ousted Col. Mengistu Mariam's autocratic Derg regime and embarked on an ambitious project of redefining the state and reinventing government.

Never before had Ethiopia known even a semblance of democracy. For more than two thousand years, feudal monarchy and dictatorship reigned supreme. Now, on the cusp of the third millennium, Ethiopia has embarked on an exciting new, and undeniably more democratic, political project. A federal republic of ethnic-based states has been formed, and the foundations of a more participatory political culture are slowly taking shape. Should it survive the dangers and challenges that threaten all fledgling political systems, the Ethiopian polity is destined for an era of immense change — change that will shake the old political order to the ground and transform vast sectors of society.

These are bold pronouncements at such an early stage of Ethiopia's federal experiment. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) deposed the Derg dictatorship just eight years ago. The new constitution and the first elected government are each less than five years old. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), and all of its component institutions, are yet to celebrate their ten-year anniversary.

Patience is warranted — a dictatorship can not magically and instantaneously transform itself into a democracy. The country's sluggish, outland-

¹ "The Process of Democratisation in Ethiopia - an overview," Office of the Government Spokesperson, 30 December 1998, as posted on web site - www.ethiospoke.net.

ishly inefficient bureaucracy will not change overnight. In fact, it remains pretty much incapable of doing anything overnight. In Ethiopia, resistance to change pervades the entire socio-political spectrum — fat-cat businessmen jealously protect their riches; civil servants safeguard their privileged positions; even poor peasants seek to preserve their relatively stable subsistence lifestyles.

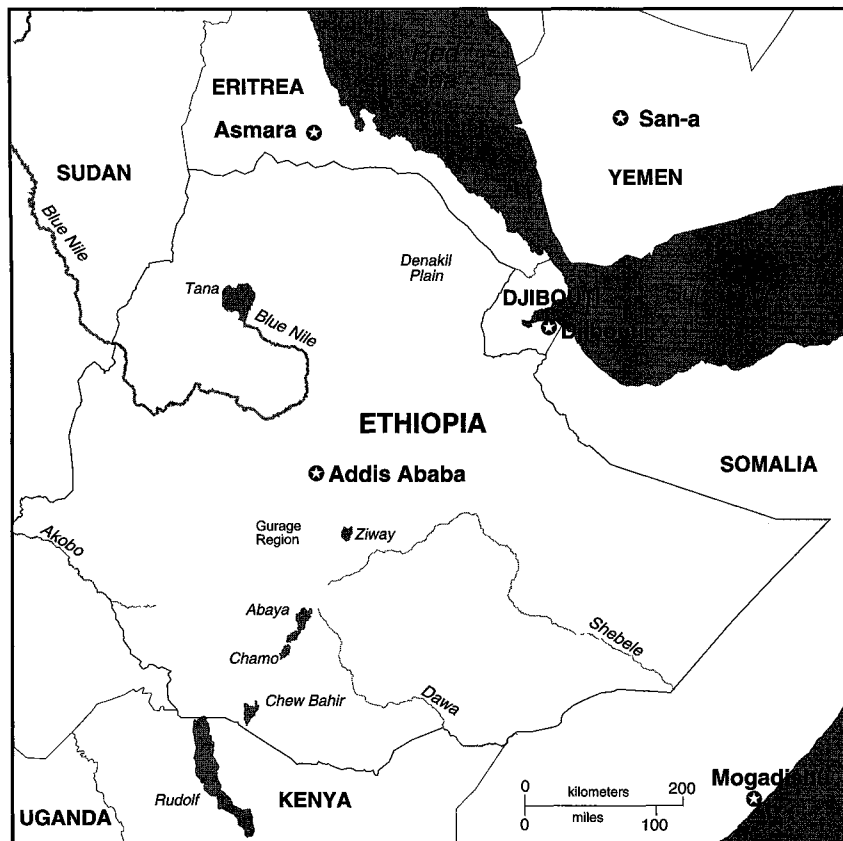
This endemic social conservatism and inertia notwithstanding, all Ethiopians, even the most historically-marginalized pastoralists, may soon feel a new breeze blowing across the political landscape. It is this vast possibility and potential — as yet unrealized but still viable within the political seed that's been planted here — that makes Ethiopia a fascinating place to explore now.

Political pundits are already arguing over the degree of democracy exhibited within Ethiopia's new system of governance.² The early indicators are inconclusive. Supporters cite progressive systemic innovations and constitutional guarantees. Detractors point to frugal protection of centralized power and

continued human rights violations.

Only over time will the degree of durable, authentic political change in Ethiopia reveal itself. The current essay is thus limited in scope. This is not an historical assessment of long-ago concluded events, but rather preliminary observations of a still-unfolding political process. Ethiopia's current leadership is laying a new path. I am merely taking a stroll along that path, trying to keep my eyes open and observe a few of the changes. Since definitive analysis is premature, I will be looking for trends and directions, new developments in some spheres and their absence in others.

Ethiopian political life in the 1990's resembles American political life in the late 18th Century. A new constitution encapsulates the sacrosanct nature of human rights and the hopes of the nation. A visionary leadership is constructing, creating, and leading new political entities. The future is uncertain. There is some dissent, but also cautious optimism that the future may be profoundly different, and potentially much brighter, than the past.



² The debate over Ethiopia's new political system has been heated both within and outside the country. An example of this debate in the literature, among foreign analysts, was published in the October 1998 issue of the *Journal of Democracy* in a series entitled "Is Ethiopia Democratic?" Paul B. Henze, in his essay "A Political Success Story," answers that question enthusiastically in the affirmative. Richard A. Joseph in "Oldspeak vs. Newspeak," and John W. Harbeson in "A Bureaucratic Authoritarian Regime," are both much more critical of the current government, asserting that little substantive change has occurred. Likewise within Ethiopia both approval and disapproval are expressed, less often in public than indirectly and in hushed tones behind closed doors. Memories of Derg brutality against political dissidents are still fresh in people's memories. Fear of political informers, perhaps for good reason, still stifles open debate.

A BRIEF POLITICAL HISTORY: FEUDAL MONARCHY TO DICTATORSHIP TO EMERGING DEMOCRACY

The northern Ethiopian Axumite Kingdom (1st Century BC – 7th Century AD) was one of the world's early great empires. Encompassing vast territories, Axum's influence stretched eastward into Sudan and across the Red Sea into southern Arabia. A succession of powerful kings governed Axum, and were memorialized by impressive granite stelae, some of which still tower over the town today. These kings issued edicts and laws which were etched in stone (in Greek, Sabaeen and Ge'ez) and covered issues from taxation to religion.

In the 4th Century, King Ezana converted to Christianity, and the new faith slowly began to spread throughout the country. Over time, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church assumed a central role in state affairs — church connections and loyalty became a litmus test for leadership legitimacy.

Several centuries later, another major political requirement emerged: the imperative of Solomonic descent. The mythical union of (supposedly Abyssinian) Queen Sheba and Israelite King Solomon is wedged deeply within the Ethiopian consciousness. From the 13th Century on, all prospective kings claimed direct lineage from this holy couple as the source of their divine right to rule.

During the Solomonic Dynasty, nearly all kings ruled from the highlands of Amhara, Shewa or Tigray. The borders of Ethiopia progressively expanded as each king sought to build his dominion over new lands and peoples. Power struggles were pervasive; nobles raised local militias and periodically contested one another for land and resources. Likewise, with no formal, unified, or codified system of government, the death of each king triggered vicious and often violent rivalries for political ascendancy.

Throughout much of this period, each region functioned with relative autonomy. Local nobles (*ras*) collected taxes, administered their mini-fiefdoms, and then paid tribute to the King of Kings (*negus negast*). In this decentralized system of governance lay some early seeds of federalism. Strong, centralized governments — of Menelik II (1889-1913), Haile Selassie (1930-1974), and Mengistu Haile Mariam (1974-91) — appeared only in the last 100 years. Earlier kings, perhaps by necessity of circumstance — slow communications and transportation, rudimentary weaponry, and the like — maintained a fragile balance between central authority and distant regional patrons.

Another predominant feature of Ethiopian political history is the domination of highland peoples (Amhara and Tigray) over lowland peoples (Oromo, Somali, Afar and others). Thus, the central historical threads discussed above — the stories of kings and their competing quests for domination — is fundamentally a history of highland politics. Eastern, western and southern lowlanders had their own forms of political organization before they were forcibly incorporated into the Ethiopian empire. In modern Ethiopia, lowlanders have always been marginalized, second-class subjects of a political order in which they have had little influence.

Emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974), last of the Solomonic monarchs, sought to modernize Ethiopia and build its stature

in the eyes of the world. As elaborated in the country's first two written constitutions (1931 and 1955), supreme power began and ended with the Emperor. The Deliberative Chambers served in an advisory capacity; nobles elected members to the lower house, while the upper house was hand-picked by His Excellency.³ The government was thus extremely centralized, with little substantive division of power — the Emperor controlled executive, judiciary and legislative functions.

Dissent among intellectuals, students and workers grew into a popular, broad-based movement that overthrew the Emperor in 1974. But hopes for a more just and participatory political order were hijacked by Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam and a small military clique that became known as the Derg. Mengistu ruled with a dictatorial iron fist, repressing individual freedoms and ethnic rights in a twisted crusade for socialist unity.

In 1974 the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) launched a two-pronged struggle against Mengistu's authoritarian regime. The TPLF framed itself as a progressive liberation movement, seeking to emancipate their fellow peasants from cyclical poverty and from a repressive government. By educating people and providing social services (e.g. helping famine victims flee to Sudan in 1974-75), the TPLF established a solid support base. Simultaneously, they took up arms against the central government, originally in an effort at secession, and later in a quest to establish a new political order for all the peoples of Ethiopia. The TPLF joined forces with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in the adjacent region to the north, and together successfully overthrew Mengistu in 1991.

As a fundamentally Tigrayan movement, the TPLF directly represented only 5% of the Ethiopian population. To build a broader-based coalition, the TPLF initiated ties with other "liberation" movements. In May 1988, they established the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) as an umbrella political party. Initially only two parties joined forces, the TPLF and the Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement (EPDM).

Following the military victory in 1991, the EPRDF formed a Transitional Government and won the country's first-ever elections in 1995. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, a seasoned TPLF leader, is chairman of the party. And, despite the membership of two additional political parties in the coalition — the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Front (SEPDM) — the TPLF maintains firm control of the reins of power.

On the surface, the forceful ascendancy of the TPLF might appear just the latest round in an ongoing political battle between Amharas and Tigrayans for the proverbial highland throne. Much of the disgruntled Amhara elite, stuck in the historical mindset of feudal monarchy, still feel they are the rightful rulers of the land. However, the EPRDF government may be ushering in a new era of democracy and decentralization. It remains to be seen whether they will succeed in dispensing with the highland political rivalries of yesteryear, and shift power from the center to the peripheries, including the historically-neglected lowlands.

³ See constitutional overview in Chapter 2 of Fasil Nahum, "Constitution for a Nation of Nations: The Ethiopian Prospect," Lawrenceville, New Jersey: Red Sea Press, 1997.

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE): The Politics of Ethnicity

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM: PROTECTING INDIVIDUAL AND NATIONAL RIGHTS

Ethiopia's federal system was codified in a new constitution, ratified on 8 December 1994. The Constitution guarantees individual and group freedoms, opening new spaces for political, social, cultural and economic expression, and protecting Ethiopians from arbitrary and targeted repression, both of which were common in the past.

The 1994 Constitution considers human rights to be "inalienable and inviolable." Apart from vague guarantees to life, liberty, equality and security, the Constitution specifies freedoms of religion, expression (press, media and artistic), assembly (political parties, trade unions), public demonstration, and movement. Specific rights of women are also protected (including affirmative action, maternity leave, and freedom from "harmful customary practices," an indirect reference to female genital mutilation).

State and religion, close bedfellows throughout Ethiopian history, have been explicitly separated. And citizens are guaranteed a host of procedural rights including due legal process (the right to counsel, a public trial, and an interpreter).

Ethiopians may own "private property," but not land. Confoundingly "the right to own rural and urban land...belongs only to the state and people. Land is an inalienable common property..."⁴ The continued nationalization of land may reflect the TPLF's old desire to protect peasants, but it is an incongruous, pseudo-communist anachronism nonetheless, and undoubtedly a hindrance to free-market economic growth. This Article is one of just two that failed to obtain consensus on the Constitutional Council. The minority opinion advocated the right to private land ownership.

Perhaps the most noteworthy sections of the Constitution address the rights of nationalities. For example, while Amharic continues to be the "working language of the Federal Government," Article 5 states that "all Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition" and enables each region to "determine their respective working languages." This is no petty change. Previously, it was an illegal and punishable offense to speak Somali or Oromifa on a bus, in school or in other public spaces. Amharic was *the* language of the land, and had to be spoken by *all* peoples. Since some 80 ethno-linguistic groups live in Ethiopia, linguistic rights are essen-

tial components of equality and freedom.

Furthermore, Article 39 guarantees "every nation, nationality, or people...the unrestricted right to self-determination up to secession." This is perhaps the most frequently quoted section of the Constitution. Everywhere in the country, this provision is proudly cited as a preventive mechanism against abuse from the center, imparting confidence to those who have been historically repressed. Ato Dawit Yohannes, the articulate Speaker of the House of People's Representatives, put it this way: "Our federation is based on voluntary consent. If any group decides they want to leave, they can. We don't hold loyalty to the current boundaries of Ethiopia above loyalty to the people's will." While Ato Dawit insists that this view is shared by all top government leaders, it is certainly not an opinion held by all Ethiopians, many of whom are nationalistic to the core, and are still wincing from the "betrayal" of Eritrea's secession in 1993.

CONSTITUTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION: PERFORMANCE GAPS

The Ethiopian Constitution is a strong document that outlines comprehensive freedoms and a flexible, participatory form of government. If implemented entirely, it will transform Ethiopia from a centralized feudal monarchy into a modern liberal democracy. Thus far, the Constitution has been unevenly applied; some freedoms have been protected, but others have been compromised.

Political prisoners, both Derg officials and opponents of the current government, have languished for years in prison. Many have not been charged, and nearly all have been denied due process of law. The 1999 Human Rights Watch World Report reported that some 10,980 political detainees had been visited by ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) by the end of 1997.

Freedoms of association have also been trampled upon when groups are considered unfriendly to the EPRDF. The Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU) and Ethiopian Teacher's Association (ETA) have both been repressed. ETA's president Dr. Taye Wolde Semayat has been imprisoned on dubious grounds, and his successor Assefa Maru was shot and killed by police on May 8, 1997. The government claims these groups are involved in armed insurgency movements, but has yet to furnish evidence. Likewise, independent human rights organizations like the Ethiopian Human Rights Council

⁴ Article 40.3, "Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia," December 8, 1994.

(EHRC) have been denied government permits, despite repeated applications.

Several journalists have been jailed for publishing negative portrayals of government loyalists. Editors and writers of *Tobia* (the most popular Amharic-language private newspaper in the country) and other private papers have been imprisoned. In January 1998, *Tobia's* offices (and records) were destroyed in a suspicious fire. Private journalist access is also restricted — they are not invited to press conferences, nor granted interviews with high-ranking public officials. Government journalists have reported from the war front with Eritrea, but private journalists have been denied permission to travel to the border.

Despite several failings, the freedom of the press is a *relative* success. During the Derg era, no private press existed. Also, compared to neighboring Eritrea, where the government controls and strictly censors all media, Ethiopia's press is quite free. Eighty-two private newspapers, ten private magazines and two private news agencies are currently operating in Ethiopia.⁵ Only with time, experience, and political maturity will long-denied freedoms and individual rights become deeply entrenched and more consistently respected.

Compounding the problems of political detainees are the wholesale failings of the judiciary system. The judiciary branch remains utterly dysfunctional and is far from independent. Justices are instructed to pass judgment in favor of the government and deliver harsh sentences on EPRDF opponents. Several judges who failed to comply with the wishes of party loyalists have been sacked.

Thus, some of the constitutional guarantees, noble in theory, have been inadequately and unevenly implemented. To be fair, the new system is still in its infancy, and it will take time to establish effective government structures and courts. The Civil Service Training College in Addis Ababa is training lawyers and judges to build judiciary capacity. However, the EPRDF has not shown the same enthusiasm and sense of urgency in building an independent judiciary as it has in other arenas.

The EPRDF government's most dramatic progress to date has been in the area of national rights. In other parts of the world, ethnic minorities continue to be brutally repressed. To place Ethiopia's progress in perspective, take for example the Kurds' ongoing struggle in Turkey. One Kurd explained a recent run-in with the law: "I was arrested last month at a checkpoint, for no reason, just because I'm a Kurd....All we want is education in Kurdish, to be able to say we are Kurds, not Turks. If the government let us have that, the war would cease the next day."⁶ All peoples of Ethiopia now have what the Kurds have

not — the freedom to speak and learn in their mother tongue, the right to raise their own national flags, and to stand up in public and show pride in their heritage.

GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE: A FEDERATION OF ETHNIC STATES

At the central level, a bicameral Parliament governs the FDRE. A 548-member Council of Peoples' Representatives functions as the primary legislative body, while a 108-member Council of the Federation acts as watchdog of the federal system and Constitution. Members of both bodies serve five-year terms. The Parliament elects the Prime Minister who, along with his Council of Ministers, composes the Executive Branch. A theoretically independent Judiciary Branch represents the third tier of national government. These structures are mimicked at the regional level. Each state elects its own parliament, which then elects a president to oversee regional government affairs.

What is most interesting about Ethiopia's new government is not the western-style democratic model of the center, but rather the decentralization of power and the composition of the regions. In the new federal structure, Ethiopia's vast and diverse populace is divided into the following nine ethnically-based regional states and two autonomous urban zones:

Tigray National Regional State
Afar National Regional State
Amhara National Regional State
Oromiya National Regional State
Somali National Regional State
Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State
Southern Nations, Nationalities and
Peoples' Regional State
Gambella National Regional State
Harari National Regional State
Dire Dawa Administrative Council
Addis Ababa Administrative Council

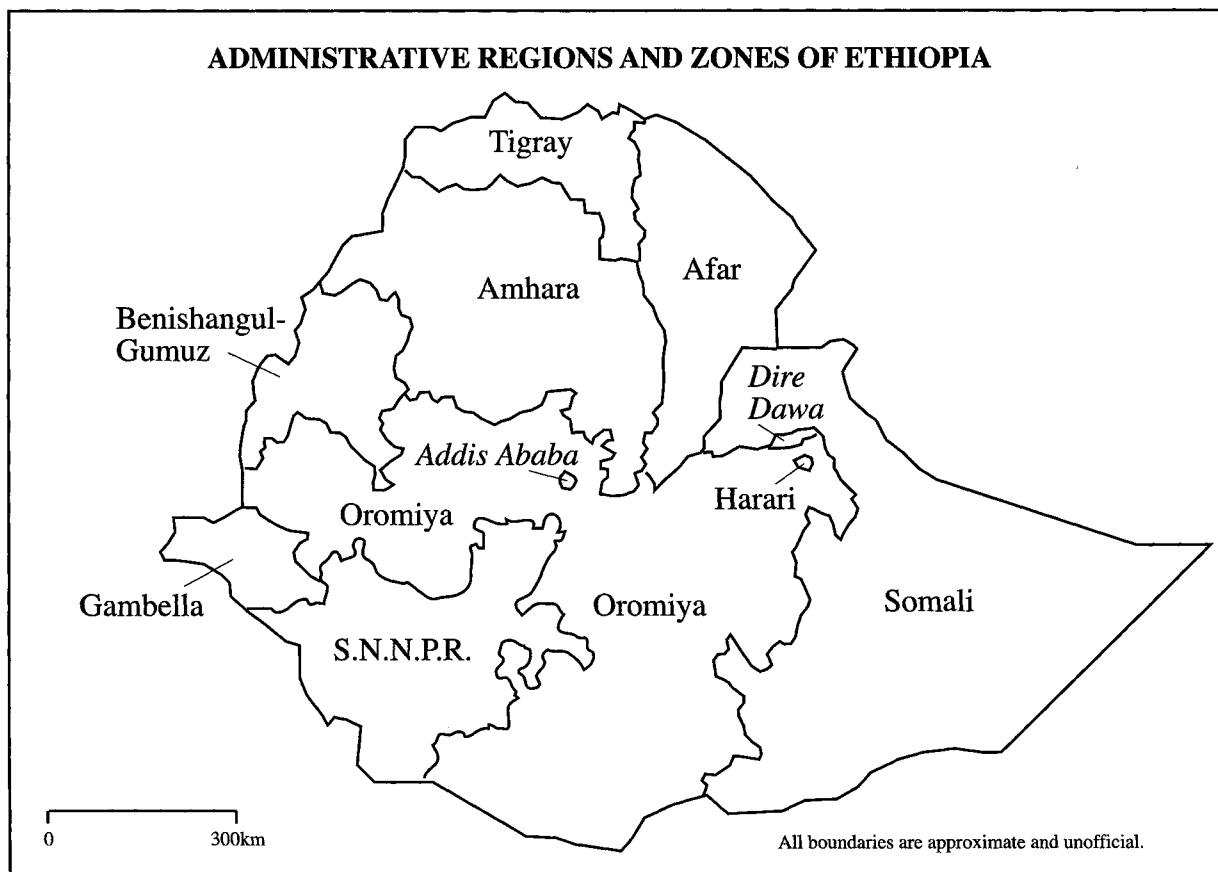
The guiding principle of Ethiopia's federal system is devolution of authority — to regional governments, and even down to the *woreda* (district) and *kebele* (neighborhood) levels. The primary responsibility for prioritizing, planning and implementing development activities has shifted from the central government to the regions. As Almaz Meko, Speaker of the Council of Federation, explained, "This is not just representative democracy, but *participatory* democracy. We are trying to educate people to govern themselves and not just look up to the federal level to do things for them."

In practice, the ethnic state system is working more

⁵ "IFJ/IPI Ethiopia Mission Report" from visit of October 12-17, 1999, International Federation of Journalists/International Press Institute.

⁶ "Turkey's Dead Zone," Jeffrey Tayler, *Worldview*, Vol. 12 No. 2, Spring 1999, pp. 41-42.

ADMINISTRATIVE REGIONS AND ZONES OF ETHIOPIA



effectively in some areas (Tigray, Amhara and Oromiya Regions) than others (Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, and Somali Regions). These performance variations are due, at least in part, to differences in resource availability, human capacities, and historical factors. The successful regions are well-organized, governed by experienced, accountable and well-educated elites, and have the basic infrastructure (roads, electricity, telecommunications) to attract investment and spur economic development.

Performance variations aside, even the theory behind Ethiopia's federal structure is controversial. Ethnic purity is more myth than reality. Each of the first five regions (Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromiya, Somali) are populated largely by the resident majority. However, the situation becomes more cloudy, and ethnic governance more problematic, in areas like the South, where dozens of nationalities reside. Likewise, in heterogeneous urban centers like Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, numerous ethnic groups live intermingled.

In Ethiopia, various ethnicities have lived together for decades, if not centuries, in relative harmony. This tolerance of difference — ethnic, religious, cultural — is

a major asset. Ethiopia's peaceful transition to an ethnic-based federal system contrasts starkly with the Yugoslavian experience, where long-repressed ethnic hatred has been brutally unleashed. Ethiopians accept and seem to appreciate their diversity. However, narrow emphasis on ethnicity may entail trade-offs, and could compromise the development of a strong, common, national identity.

The selection of the ethnic states was itself enigmatic. For example, Harari National Regional State, the smallest of the nine, has a total population of just 131,000. The Harari ethnic minority numbers 9,000 (6.8 percent of the region), but is guaranteed the lion's share of political power in the region.⁷ Authorities describe the unbalanced composition of Harar's government as an effort to protect the national rights of an historically-repressed group. While the Harari people may have been targeted by past regimes, they are still the wealthiest and best-educated in the region. Furthermore, past injustice does not validate a skewed system where the Oromo majority (51 percent) and Amhara (32 percent) are relegated to secondary positions.

But set aside the peculiar internal workings of the

⁷ Harari Regional State is governed by a bicameral parliament. The 14 seats in the Harari House are reserved for Harari people. The 22 seats of the People's House are open to all ethnic groups. In the 1995 election 4 of these seats were won by Hararis, 17 by Oromos and 1 by an Amhara. Thus, of the 36 parliamentary seats in the region, the Harari people (6.8% of the population) controlled 18 seats (50%).

Harari Regional government. How did 9,000 Harari people, a mere 0.015 percent of Ethiopia's population get their own state when much larger groups like the 6 million Sidama people were lumped into the Southern People's state? Hararis are one of the smallest of Ethiopia's 80-plus ethno-linguistic groups. Their attainment of such a prominent position within the new federal system is a mystery.

Regional self-governance in a country where the center has always jealously protected political power is no small feat. For the marginalized — Somali, Afar, Oromo and others — self-rule is new, and inevitably a learning process. Progress may be slow, but the new system itself is cause for celebration. Corruption, inefficiency and lack of capacity present challenges to be confronted and overcome. Such problems with self-rule are to be expected in the early years, as democracy takes root and local populations learn to govern their own affairs.

More serious are the political manipulations that threaten pluralism. Local government *kebeles* and *woredas* are packed with political cadres expected to act in the interest of the ruling Party. Even in the regions, the EPRDF maintains a tight grip on power. Throughout the country, Tigrayan "advisors" have been posted in regional government bureaus. Many observers believe these "advisors" are actually decision-makers, commanding their puppet-like counterparts on all issues of consequence. Others do not believe the "advisors" manipulate regional affairs, but rather provide capacity-building support to regional administrations that are admittedly lacking in skilled manpower.

The "advisor" debate notwithstanding, political mavericks are regularly forced from office by EPRDF cadres, often on fabricated grounds of mismanagement or corruption. Today, political survival in Ethiopia demands party loyalty above all else. Independent thinking and action is frowned upon and punished, even if popular and in the best interests of constituents. The primacy of loyalty, and threats used to maintain it, must be relaxed in order for a richer, broader-based pluralism to emerge.

However, there are several positive signs as well. In Africa, ruling elites often become entrenched, corrupt and entirely unaccountable. They govern strictly out of self-interest, padding their personal bank accounts and dealing favors to their supporters. Ethiopian politicians certainly have not been immune to such abuses of power. Lucrative contracts are often awarded to politically-friendly companies. However, other indicators point to ongoing scrutiny of bureaucrats, and increasing accountability.

While many officials have been fired for political rea-

sons, many others have lost their jobs because of corruption and mismanagement. No one is immune from evaluation, and those who engage in shady dealings are eventually sacked. Hence, six presidents have governed Somali Region in so many years. In Oromiya Region 4,000 officials at all levels of regional, district and local government were dismissed after a recent round of evaluations.⁸ Most recently, the President of Harari State, Abdulahi Idris, "resigned" amid an investigation into a scandal over a regional water project.⁹

That widespread corruption continues is disconcerting; that it is being confronted, and perpetrators are being held accountable, is unquestionably positive. Job security seems increasingly tied to performance. Not to glorify the situation — Ethiopia's civil service continues to be plagued by a legacy of inertia and inefficiency; the cumbersome bureaucracy remains strewn with senseless obstacles and disincentives. But some changes are evident. And in Ethiopia, where who you are has always been much more important than what you do, early rumblings of meritocracy are noteworthy.

EMPHASIZING ETHNICITY: POLITICAL PARTIES

Of the 65 registered political parties, only seven are "national" parties; the other 58 are ethnic-based. Take, for example, the Burgi Peoples' United Democratic Movement (BPUDM); the Denta, Debamo, Kitchenchla Democratic Organization (DDKDO); and the Benishangul North Western Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Unity Party (BNWEPDUP), the latter not to be confused with the Benishangul Western Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Organization (BWEPDO). The political landscape is cluttered with herds of nominal ethnic political parties. Most are fairly irrelevant, and power remains concentrated in the hands of a few major parties.

The formation of nearly all political parties on the basis of ethnic and clan identity has, in an extremely short period of time, created a political culture of separation, exclusion, and us-vs.-them-ness. In Harar, I met with leaders from the opposition Harari Democratic Unity Party (HDUP). They lost the 1995 election, and claim the process was neither free nor fair. Their party members were threatened, harassed and jailed. However, as a "Harari" party, their natural constituency is less than 7 percent of the region's population. I asked, "Why not transform yourselves into a multi-ethnic party, appealing to a much broader base of the population?" Despite their desire to represent "the poor" and other non-ethnic-specific groups, they couldn't really understand the question. Their political mentality has been so strongly influenced by the current dogma — essentially that political parties should be ethnically-exclusive — that they couldn't envision, much less

⁸ Interview with Dawit Yohannes, Speaker of the Council of People's Representatives, 8 September 1999.

⁹ "Harar State Chief Resigns," *The Monitor*, Vol. VII, No. 2, September 14, 1999, p. 1.

perceive the benefits of, establishing a non-ethnic party.

Even Professor Asrat Woldeyes, an outspoken advocate of national unity, established an Amhara party (AAPO), rather than a more inclusive, non-ethnic party. Several prominent opposition political parties, including Asrat's All-Amhara People's Organization (AAPO) and the Council of Alternative Forces for Peace and Democracy in Ethiopia (CAFPDE), have been suppressed, their leaders intimidated and jailed. The nation mourned and supporters took to the streets earlier this year when Professor Asrat died just months after his release from prison.

Political foul play aside, the emphasis on ethnic-based politicking also ignores the many common needs and aspirations that connect Ethiopians. For example, peasants share similar development agendas, regardless of whether they are Amharas, Oromos, or Tigrayans. For the protection of cultural issues and national rights, ethnic parties can be useful. But in tackling poverty and other issues that bind most Ethiopians, the focus on ethnicity is less appropriate.

The fragmentation of Ethiopia into ethnic polities governed by ethnic parties is thus both a potential blessing and curse. If ethnic political parties bring government closer to the people, molding services to local realities, and interacting with constituents in a language they understand, all the better. However, if these parties and their constituents become too insular, regarding other ethnicities and their representatives with suspicion, jealousy and hostility, dangerous ethnic conflicts could erupt. In this ethnic federal system, a delicate balance must be maintained, enabling ethnic pride and self-governance to flourish in tandem with national unity, a cooperative spirit and respect for diversity.

EMPHASIZING ETHNICITY: CIVIL SOCIETY

A similar appeal to ethnicity is penetrating civil society. Since 1991, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have sprung up all over the country. These private organizations seek to complement government development efforts, and can often do so creatively, efficiently, and with less bureaucracy. Over the past eight years, the government has sought to regulate and increase accountability in the NGO sector. These measures often interfere with internal program operations, as NGOs must obtain endless permissions, and fight to bring in foreign staff and equipment. These impediments notwithstanding, civil society is flourishing, and the EPRDF deserves

credit for creating an environment where NGOs can operate. Again, such achievements are most impressive when put in context. During the Derg, local NGOs were essentially nonexistent, and in neighboring Eritrea, the government has virtually eliminated NGOs.¹⁰

Most of Ethiopia's big local NGO players have been organized according to ethnicity. In Tigray, REST (Relief Society of Tigray) and TDA (Tigray Development Association) have carved up the regional pie by sector for their mutual consumption. In Amhara Region, the Amhara Development Agency (ADA) dominates, as does the Ogaden Welfare Society (OWS) in Somali Region. These organizations maintain extremely close ties to regional government, and some observers question whether they are really *non-governmental* organizations at all. A controversial term, GONGO (government-operated non-governmental organization) has been bandied about to describe the phenomenon.

Several horizontal associations have sprouted in the form of trade associations, unions and interest groups. Unlike the vertical connections of ethnic organizations, horizontal associations create linkages that transcend ethnic parochialism. Some of these groups, however, have been attacked by the government. For example, members of the Ethiopian Teacher's Association (ETA) and Ethiopian Free Journalists Association (EFJA) have been arrested and harassed.

The EPRDF government has begun laying the foundation for a pluralist society, but appears internally conflicted when it comes to accepting different perspectives and relinquishing control. Pluralism demands tolerance of different viewpoints and opinions, and requires equal application of the law to all groups, even unpopular ones. Tolerance must embrace all social arenas, not just ethnicity. The EPRDF has begun to establish a more open society — one which holds superb potential, but also requires less government control, interference and repression.

ASSESSING ETHIOPIAN FEDERALISM: THE EARLY YEARS

While the *ethnic* basis of the new system is controversial, federalism itself is an appropriate response to the highly centralized political organization of the past. Throughout history, a privileged (mostly Amhara) elite ruled the country, concentrating nearly all power in the center. Thus, the desire to protect the rights of every group and grant them increased control of their own affairs, is

¹⁰ The Eritrean government is extremely committed to a philosophy of self-reliance. Some NGOs assisted Eritrea during the liberation struggle. Since independence, however, the government has sought to phase-out NGOs. In 1997, claiming the tasks of rehabilitation were completed, the Eritrean government closed down most international NGOs. In April 1999, however, the government requested NGO emergency assistance to help service deported and displaced populations (humanitarian casualties of the border war with Ethiopia). Only a few international NGOs have returned (e.g. Oxfam International and Save the Children/UK). Eritrea also has very few national NGOs, and a correspondingly poorly developed civil society. In any event, Ethiopia has thus far proven much more open and accommodating to civil society actors of all types.

commendable. The question remains, however, whether a system constructed on ethnic lines will prove viable for the nation as a nation. Or, will it lead to the balkanization of the country?

Such fears are not entirely unfounded. The northern province of Eritrea seceded in 1993, prior to the drafting of the Constitution. Other rebel movements — the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and some Afar groups — would certainly like to slip through the secession loophole. That constitutional guarantee, however, requires legal activity, not armed insurrection. In a destructive spinoff of the border war, Eritrea has attempted to distract and destabilize Ethiopia by providing support to rebel groups and Somali warlord Hussein Aidede's clan faction. During the past few months, fierce battles have engaged the Ethiopian military in the south and deep within Somalia.

While rebel movements still garner some home-grown support, their legitimacy is waning. In this era of ethnic self-governance, where the right to secession is constitutionally guaranteed, the concept of a "liberation movement" is outdated. National rights are guaranteed, and self-governance is gradually sucking the wind out of secessionist sails.

Identity-based political organization is a slippery slope. While the Constitution does not specify exact procedures, Article 47 provides "The nations, nationalities, and people within the states...the right to establish, at any time, a state of their own." This could lead to an endless fractionalization of the Ethiopian polity with every ethnic sub-entity and sub-sub-clan exercising its right to self-determination. The Southern Peoples' State could break into more than 30 ethnic mini-states, and the Somali Region could disintegrate into sub-clan fiefdoms. All of this may sound farfetched and alarmist in the short-term, but destabilization is a real danger in the long run.

Council of the Federation Speaker Almaz Meko points to the opposite trend — some ethnic groups have voluntarily coalesced into larger, umbrella political units. During the transitional period, Southern People's State was initially divided into four separate regions; the people of the area eventually decided to join forces, creating one larger state. With the exception of a few border disputes between regions, Almaz says no other substantive conflicts have surfaced.

The otherwise disastrous border war with Eritrea has fostered a renewed sense of national unity. Whereas the EPRDF had previously focused people on their ethnic differences, the war with Eritrea reminded everyone of their essential Ethiopian-ness. Somalis, for example, never before volunteered to fight on behalf of Ethiopia. Their current participation indicates they (and other marginalized

groups) now feel a greater stake in the country.

When scrutiny is balanced by relativity, Ethiopia's progress on the road to democracy has been impressive. Compare Eritrea. The northern nation that seceded from Ethiopia in 1993 has formed a one-party state where political dissent is not tolerated, all press is censored, and civil society is stifled. The Eritrean government is extremely popular, but it is not democratic.

Yet much of Ethiopia's democratic potential remains just that — potential. The Constitution is an excellent document, spelling out a broad range of individual and group rights. Still, a large gap remains between the theory and the execution of its provisions. In some arenas the pace of reform has been speedier than in others. These performance variations are only partially due to a lack of capacity; change has also been hindered by inertia and inadequate commitment.

Many African governments have hijacked democratic processes in the interests of "national security" and other false pretenses to preserve power. But in Ethiopia, the lingering war on the border has not deterred the EPRDF from announcing the country's second democratic elections, due to be held on May 14, 2000. Opposition political parties are concerned that the playing field is uneven. The EPRDF holds a near-monopolistic grip on power, and has intimidated most would-be contenders. Another worrisome sign is the government's apparent resistance to foreign election observers.¹¹

The first election of the new millennium represent a great opportunity, and one the EPRDF should not squander. By ensuring an open environment — enabling all parties to compete equally, and rejecting repression, intimidation, and coercion — the EPRDF can show the people of Ethiopia and the rest of the world that it is serious about democracy.

By any measure, the sea-changes in Ethiopia's political system will take time to bear fruit. A functional and efficient democratic ethos takes time to form and flourish. Democratic political culture does not just appear and miraculously burrow into the collective political conscience overnight (particularly in a largely illiterate peasant population). Federal democracy is a complex and continually evolving system. On August 5, 1999, President Bill Clinton, leader of a 223-year-old democracy, issued a proclamation on the intricacies of American federalism. Ethiopia's new federal democratic republic is destined for growing pains. However, the fundamental changes that such a system represents for the country and its people, the hope and possibility that it contains, should not be overlooked because of the inevitable problems it experiences in its youth. □

¹¹ "No foreign observers in the coming election; opposition parties look askance at election" *Tomar*, September 1, 1999 as translated in *Ethiopian Weekly Press Digest*, Vol. VI, No. 36, September 9, 1999, p. 10.

Acronyms

AAPO	All-Amhara People's Organization
ADA	Amhara Development Association
BNWEPDUP	Benishangul North Western Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Unity Party
BPUDM	Burgi Peoples' United Democratic Movement
BWEPDO	Benishangul Western Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Organization
CAFPDE	Council of Alternative Forces for Peace and Democracy in Ethiopia
CETU	Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions
DDKDO	Denta, Debamo, Kitchenchla Democratic Organization
EHRC	Ethiopian Human Rights Council
EPDM	Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
ETA	Ethiopian Teacher's Association
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
GONGO	Government-Operated Non-Governmental Organization
HDUP	Harari Democratic Unity Party
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
ONLF	Ogadeen National Liberation Front
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organization
OWS	Ogadeen Welfare Society
REST	Relief Society of Tigray
SEPDP	Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Party
TDA	Tigray Development Association
TPLF	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front

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