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CONTENTS

Sr. No.	TITLE & NAME OF THE AUTHOR (S)	Page No.
1.	IDENTIFICATION OF KEY MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS; AN IMPLEMENTATION OF MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS IN PAKISTANI ORGANIZATIONS <i>MUHAMMAD TAHIR AKBAR & DR. MUHAMMAD RAMZAN</i>	1
2.	PROFITABILITY OF POTATO BASED CROPPING PATTERNS COMPARED TO RICE BASED CROPPING PATTERNS IN MYMENSINGH REGION <i>ROMAZA KHANUM, MD.SHARIFUL ISLAM & D. AFROZA</i>	5
3.	THE IMPACT OF ACCOUNTING INFORMATION SYSTEMS IN THE QUALITY OF FINANCIAL INFORMATION IN THE PRIVATE JORDANIAN UNIVERSITIES: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY <i>DR. ATEF A. S. AL-BAWAB</i>	11
4.	THE ROLE OF SNNPRS MARKETING AND COOPERATIVE BUREAU IN THE EXPANSION AND DEVELOPMENT OF COOPERATIVES IN SNNPR REGION, ETHIOPIA, AFRICA <i>DR. S. BALAMURUGAN</i>	18
5.	STUDY ON THE HEALTH LIFESTYLE OF SENIOR LEARNERS IN TAIWAN <i>JUI-YING HUNG & CHIEN-HUI YANG</i>	27
6.	EFFECT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ON CORPORATE FINANCIAL REPORTING IN NIGERIA <i>AKINYOMI OLADELE JOHN & DR. ENAHORO JOHN A.</i>	31
7.	DIAGNOSTIC STUDY ON INTERACTIVE ADS AND ITS RESPONSE TOWARDS THE FM RADIO <i>EMON KALYAN CHOWDHURY & TAHMINA REZA</i>	36
8.	ACCOMMODATION OF ETHNIC QUEST FOR SELF-GOVERNANCE UNDER ETHNIC FEDERAL SYSTEM IN ETHIOPIA: THE EXPERIENCE OF SOUTHERN REGIONAL STATE <i>TEMESGEN THOMAS HALABO</i>	42
9.	UNIVERSITY PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT USING THE BALANCED SCORECARD METHOD – SPECIAL FOCUS TO THE LEARNING AND GROWTH PERSPECTIVE <i>W.M.R.B.WEERASOORIYA</i>	46
10.	INDEPENDENT DIRECTORS IN LISTED INDIAN PUBLIC SECTOR ENTERPRISES: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY <i>MOHINDER SINGH TONK</i>	51
11.	RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMOTIONAL & SOCIAL COMPETENCES AND TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP STYLE <i>BADRI BAJAJ & DR. Y. MEDURY</i>	56
12.	ICT DEVELOPMENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA: THE ROAD MAP AHEAD <i>DR. M. K. SINGH & DR. SONAL SHARMA</i>	60
13.	CONSUMER SENSITIVITY TOWARDS PRICING OF COSMETIC PRODUCTS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY <i>DR. D. S. CHAUBEY, LOKENDRA YADAV & HARISH CHANDRA BHATT</i>	67
14.	CONVENIENCE YIELD: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCES FROM INDIAN CHILLI MARKET <i>IRFAN UL HAQ & DR. K CHANDERASEKHARA RAO</i>	74
15.	CELLULAR PHONES: THE HUB OF MODERN COMMUNICATION - AN ANALYTICAL STUDY <i>DR. A. RAMA & S. MATHUMITHA</i>	78
16.	WOMAN LEADERSHIP IN AXIS BANK: A COMPARISON OF WOMAN AND MAN LEADER USING CAMEL MODEL <i>ARTI CHANDANI & DR. MITA MEHTA</i>	83
17.	A STUDY OF ANTS TEAMBUILDING TECHNIQUES AND ITS APPLICATION IN ORGANIZATIONAL WORK TEAMS <i>AMAR DATT & DR. D. GOPALAKRISHNA</i>	90
18.	BASEL II AND INDIAN CREDIT RATING AGENCIES – IMPACT & IMPLICATIONS <i>RAVI KANT & DR. S. C. JAIN</i>	95
19.	A STUDY ON THE CONSUMPTION PATTERN OF BAKERY PRODUCTS IN SOUTHERN REGION OF TAMIL NADU <i>DR. A. MARTIN DAVID, R. KALYAN KUMAR & G.DHARAKESWARI</i>	101
20.	e-COMMERCE: AN INVISIBLE GIANT COMPETITOR IN RETAILING IN EMERGING COUNTRIES <i>NISHU AYEDEE.</i>	107
21.	THE GREAT MATHEMATICIAN SRINIVASA RAMANUJAN <i>G. VIJAYALAKSHMI</i>	111
22.	ISSUES RELATING TRANSITION IPv4 TO IPv6 IN INDIA <i>ANANDAKUMAR.H</i>	117
23.	QUALITY OF WORK-LIFE: A TOOL TO ENHANCE CONFIDENCE AMONG EMPLOYEES <i>JYOTI BAHL</i>	124
24.	GLOBAL RECESSION: IMPACT, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES <i>SHAIKH FARHAT FATMA</i>	128
25.	IMPACT OF CELL PHONE ON LIFESTYLE OF YOUTH: A SURVEY REPORT <i>MALIK GHUFRAN RUMI, PALLAVI TOTLANI & VINSHI GUPTA</i>	133
26.	EFFECTIVENESS OF TRAINING IN AUTO COMPONENT INDUSTRY – AN EMPIRICAL STUDY <i>R.SETHUMADHAVAN</i>	143
27.	THE IMPACT ON MARKETING BY THE ADVENT OF WEB 2.0 INTERNET TOOLS <i>JAYAKUMAR MAHADEVAN</i>	146
28.	MARKET INFLUENCE ON THE TECHNOLOGY IN THE ENERGY SECTOR - A STUDY OF INDIAN SCENARIO <i>MANOHAR SALIMATH C</i>	150
29.	SPOT ELECTRICITY PRICE MODELLING AND FORECASTING <i>G P GIRISH</i>	154
30.	AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF RURAL MARKETING IN INDIA - OPPORTUNITIES AND POSSIBILITY <i>BASAVARAJAPPA M T</i>	158
	REQUEST FOR FEEDBACK	162

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ACCOMMODATION OF ETHNIC QUEST FOR SELF-GOVERNANCE UNDER ETHNIC FEDERAL SYSTEM IN ETHIOPIA: THE EXPERIENCE OF SOUTHERN REGIONAL STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the ethnic quest for self-governance and their management under Ethiopian federal system by focusing on experience from the Southern Regional State. The FDRE constitution has created a positive interrelationship between practicing the right to self-determination and ethnic identity thereby recognizing this right to ethnically defined groups. Therefore, it is justifiable and legitimate for all ethnically defined groups to claim the right to self-determination. The main objective of this study was to examine the ethnic claims for self-governance in multi-ethnic Southern Regional State within the context of Ethiopian ethnic federal system. This study was based on qualitative method approach and the study employed a number of data collection methods such as data from primary and archival sources and secondary literature. The finding of the study revealed that by merging very diverse ethno-linguistic groups into one federated unit, the Southern Nation Nationalities and Peoples Regional State, the existing political system has created minority-within-minority. As a result, those ethnic groups who have been given their own sub-regional administrative units have acquired political majority over the subsumed ethnic groups. This, in turn, has created a feeling of being dominated and marginalized by the subsumed ethnic groups. This is the basic cause for continuing dynamics of ethnic claims for self-governance at Regional, Zonal and Woreda status in this Regional State. The study recommended that the Southern Regional State should be restructured to accommodate continuing dynamics of ethnic claims for self-governance.

KEYWORDS

EPRDF, FDRE, PDRE, SNNPRS, TGE, self governance.

INTRODUCTION

Reorganizing the Ethiopian state structure along ethnic federal model was an immediate agenda of EPRDF which successfully secured state power by overthrowing military regime in May 1991. New Government's commitment to establish a new society based on equality, rule of law and the right to self-determination all nation, nationality and people, including secession was evidenced in the transitional period Charter, which was ratified in 1991, as a clear departure from its predecessors (Charter, 1991). Once the new charter paved the way for decentralization, Ethiopia has no longer a unitary but a federal state since 1995. The new FDRE constitution created a landmark in the history of the country as far as ethnic questions are concerned. This constitution, for the first time, formalized an ethnic-based federal state structure model which gave autonomous right to federated units. This federal arrangement is basically demarcated on the basis of "settlement patterns, identity, language and consent of the people concerned" (Art. 46/2).

The federalization of Ethiopia represents a huge rupture in the country's political history in that the hitherto marginalized ethnic groups are now entitled to the right to self-determination including secession. It is this rapturous move that made Ethiopia a federal democratic republic consisting of nine federated units (art.47/1), namely Afar, Amhara, Benishangul, Gambella, Hareri, Oromia, SNNPRS, Somali and Tigray.

The SNNPRS is one of the nine federated units currently divided into fourteen administrative zones and three special woredas. It is the most multi-ethnic regional state. It was established after the merger of the five regional units (kilil 7-11) organized in today's South during transitional period. This merger has provoked political mobilization in the South. The quest for re-establishment of Regional status by Sidama and Zonal status by Wolayita, inter alia, were prominent cases in point in the South (Aalen, 2008). However, such similar ethnic claims for self-governance have continued to become significant political factors in the region, which is the issue this study aspires to grapple with.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES AND REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This sub-section is dedicated to discussing theoretical approaches on federalism as an option for managing ethnic conflicts. Its aim is to establish theoretical frameworks upon which continuing dynamics of ethnic quest for self-governance in SNNPRS is explored and analyzed.

FEDERALISM AS AN OPTION FOR MANAGING ETHNIC CONFLICT IN MULTI-ETHNIC STATE

The federal idea is getting popularity in the world. There are several reasons for this increasing interest in federalism. One of the reasons, as argued by Kymlicka (2005:269), is that federalism provides the most appropriate mechanism for accommodating ethnic diversity. He further states that since federalism is a notoriously flexible system, it can accommodate diversified interests and intensifies democracy. For Alemante (2003:56), even though federal system is inherently fragile, it has the potential for accommodating ethnic diversity and fostering the values embedded in ethnic community.

Federalism, which aims at achieving self-rule and shared rule, greatly attracted multi-ethnic states as a means of managing ethno-linguistic diversity (Elazar, 1987 quoted in Asnake, 2004:53). Federalism seems to provide the closest institutional solution combining shared rule for some commonly shared purposes and self-rule for other purposes of regional interests. Kymlicka (2005:270) argues that even if many federal systems arose for reasons unrelated to ethno-linguistic diversity, federalism is increasingly considered as a solution to the problems of multi-nation states. Thus, to manage inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts in multi-ethnic states, no other medicine could work other than federalism. For instance, introduction of ethnic-based federal model in multi-ethnic state of Ethiopia is primarily as a mechanism of conflict resolution (Vaughan, 2003:36) or as a means of maintaining unity and averting disintegration (Aalen, 2001:53).

Even if many scholars increasingly advocate for the use of federalism as a mechanism of handling ethno-linguistic diversity, there are also scholars who reveal their doubts about the use of federal option as device for managing this diversity. Some oppose federal device for fear of fragmentation. Hecter (2000), one of the advocates of federal device, states that federalism increases self-government or it meets the claims for autonomy by concession and hence, the demand for secession or the threat of fragmentation is correspondingly reduced (quoted in Aalen, 2001:19). **In stark contrast, Kymlicka (2005) argues that federalism does not prevent secession, rather the presence of regional autonomy in multi-ethnic federal states increases the desire for more autonomy, and this leads to the proliferation of ethno-nationalism which is probably the strongest force against federalism.** Some scholars like Kimenyi propose ethnic based federalism as a model of harmonizing ethnic claims (ibid). If federation is ethnically based like in the Ethiopian system, the country is divided into sub-units whose borders are drawn in a way that ensures that various ethnic groups will form a local majority in one or more of the sub-units (Kymlicka, 2006). By controlling their own areas, minorities may feel a sense of security and be enabled to promote their own culture and identity.

And yet, in accepting or offering the federal bargain as an instrument of managing ethno-linguistic diversity, emphasis must be given to the manner of approaching federalism as an option. This is because there are no universally accepted principles of federalism to follow. In addition, the operation of the federal system requires an analysis of more than formal institutional structures. **It requires an analysis of the interaction of societies, structures and processes.** Elazer (1994) argues that federalism is congenial to pluralism is too obvious to argue (as quoted in Tsegay, 2001). But the manner of institutionalizing the pluralism constitutionally determines the durability of federal arrangements (ibid). Unlike Kimenyi who proposes ethnic based federal model for multi-ethnic states, for

Elazer, **multiethnic federal system can succeed only if the basis of state formation is anything other than ethnicity**. Alemante (2003), one of the skeptical about federal option, argues that federal system is inherently fragile even without adding ethnicity into its mix.

To sum up, theoretical discourse on federalism as well as contending views reviewed here concerning the use of federal option as a device of managing ethno-linguistic diversity, reflect the potential problems of designing the state structures.

THE ROUTE TO ETHNIC FEDERALISM IN ETHIOPIA

When EPRDF came to power as a new government, the change was not merely of political power; it also ushered an absolutely new perspective into the political landscape of the country by re-engineering the Ethiopian state on an entirely new foundation. EPRDF has adopted, as its ideological bedrock, ethnic-based federal model around Marxist-Leninist principle of the 'right to self-determination of nations, nationalities and peoples', including secession as one in a series of approaches to 'national questions' (Vaughan, 2003). A new EPRDF perspective immediately manifested itself in the 1991 Charter. The transitional government was disintegrated after the coming into effect of the country's fourth new EPRDF constitution in 1995.

The FDRE Constitution, which gives the ownership to nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia, has established a federal state structure (Art.1). By reducing the number of self-governing regions by five, the constitution enumerates nine states constituting the FDRE in Art.47/1.

Theoretically, ethnic federalism is expected to address the questions of decentralization of power and resources. This by implication would give autonomous power to the regional states. Practically, however, several inconsistencies and mutually incompatible policies and implementation procedures have prevailed so far even though the admirers have hailed it as an aspect of democratization of the state and even as a model for other multi-ethnic states in Africa (Dereje, 2006; Young, 1996). As indicated in Article 47/1, the current ethnic-based federal model established only nine states as the members of the federation, a reduced number compared to 14 regional states of the transitional period. Only five major ethnic groups (Oromo, Tigray, Amhara, Somali and Afar) have been granted their own 'mother states' designated by their own name as a core nationality (Merera, 2003). Only a few major ethnic groups were accorded the regional status even if the sub-national states were organized on the basis of ethno-linguistic criteria (Akililu, 2003).

While constitutionally entitling the right to self-determination including secession for all ethnically defined groups, the EPRDF regime has conflated five regional units of the transitional period into one unit in the South. As a result, 56 diverse ethnic groups of the former five regional units have been lumped together in a single federated unit. The implementation of the federal model on the basis of ethnicity and language brought a number of anomalies. Now, let us see the dynamics of continuing ethnic claims for self-determination in the SNNPRS.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

By analyzing the continuing dynamics of ethnic claims for self-determination in SNNPRS, the study may have the following significances:

- It may contribute to the understanding of the continuing dynamics of ethnic claims for self-governance in the South.
- It may help to understand the extent to which the existing EPRDF policy initiatives such as federal state structure and recognizing the right to self-determination have virtually addressed ethnic claims for self-determination in Ethiopia in general and the SNNPRS in particular.
- It may provide concrete evidence for policy makers, formal government institutions and other concerned bodies responsible in handling and resolving this and other similar cases in SNNPRS.
- Finally, this study may serve as a base for future further research in the area

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The FDRE constitution in article 39(1) clearly stipulates the right to self-determination up to secession for ethnically defined groups in the country. As a result, a positive interrelationship between practicing the right to self-determination and ethnic identity has been created. Therefore, it is justifiable and legitimate for all ethnically defined groups to claim the right to self-determination.

Despite this extensive right, the constitution established only nine federated units, a reduced number by five as compared to the transitional period (1991-1995). They were carved on the basis of settlement patterns, language, identity, and consent of the people concerned. The SNNPRS, which is one of nine federated unit in Ethiopia, is a unique development within the Ethiopian federal system as over 56 diverse ethno-linguistic groups are consolidated. Under this federated unit. As a result, this federal arrangement has created minority-within-minority (Akililu, 2003 and Aalen, 2008).

Given the multi-ethnic nature of SNNPRS, it is expected that there exists a room for the establishment of sub-national levels of administration that are meant for the self-determination of smaller ethnic groups. Currently, there exist only 21 sub-regional units in the region. In SNNPRS, more than 50+ ethno-linguistic groups do not have zones or special woredas designated by their own names (Beken, 2008). These ethno-linguistic groups either live in multi-ethnic Zones such as Debub Omo or are a minority group in a zone or special woreda dominated and designated by the names of other groups (ibid). This study is, therefore, aspires to examine the continuing dynamics of ethnic claims for self-governance and how these ethnic claims have been causing inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts in this Regional State within the context of Ethiopian federal system.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Objectives of this study are:

- To explore how far the ethnic federal model and concomitant right to self-determination has virtually addressed ethnic claims for self-governance in the SNNPRS.
- To investigate the causes for continuing dynamics of ethnic claims for self-governance in SNNPRS.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

Even though ethnic quest for self-governances in the SNNPRS are fundamental issues and are deep-rooted in the empire building of the modern Ethiopian state, the new Ethiopian Experiment of ethnic Federal state structure and concomitant right to self-determination for all ethnically defined groups seems to have aggravated ethnic claims for self-governance as the government failed to materialize its policies on the practical ground as per constitutional provision. The assumption, as I will try to demonstrate in this article, is that the self-contradictory nature in implementing ethnic federalism and the right to self-determination could have ignited ethnic quest for self-governance in Ethiopia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is based on qualitative method approach mainly with Peace and Security, and to some extent historical orientations. For this research, non-probability sampling techniques, particularly of convenience and judgmental were employed. The primary and secondary data were collected by using different instruments. Primary data collated through interview, focus group discussions, legal documents and official letters. The legal documents include transitional period charter, federal and SNNPRS constitutions and proclamations. The official letters include those letters ethnic groups in the SNNPRS have written to or received from any concerned government bodies so as to analyze the continuing dynamics of ethnic claims for self-governance. This study also makes use of secondary sources. As long as data analysis is concerned, this study makes use of concurrent methods of data analysis. To maintain the reliability, credibility and validity of the research, different strategies such as in-depth understanding of the study issue, cross-checking the gathered data with other sources and triangulation of the data using thematic analysis were designated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**DYNAMICS OF ETHNIC GROUPS' QUEST FOR SELF-GOVERNANCE IN SNNPRS****INTRODUCTION**

In the feudal regime, ethnic groups in the Southern Ethiopia had long been totally marginalized and they were hardly recognized for their existence (Merera, 2003 and Aalen, 2008). The coming of EFRDF in the hitherto socially, economically and politically marginalized and peripheral area (south) of Ethiopia represented both far reaching radical political changes and continuities from the past. Watson (2002) states that the first years after the demise of the *Derg* were nevertheless described as a honeymoon for the peoples previously marginalized ethnic groups in southern Ethiopia. Under existing regime, ethnic groups of the south have thus come into contact with a new socio-economic and political changes and continuities from the past.

During the initial part of the transitional period, ethnic claims had been encouraged by the EPRDF in the South for self-determination by its rhetoric of "liberating the oppressed nationalities" (Vaughan, 2003). This became apparent when five regional units (kilil 7-11) were organized in the areas comprising today's SNNPRS by the Proclamation no.7/1992 that established a total of 14 National/Regional self-governing Regions (kilils). Ethnically defined groups within these five Regional units also managed to gain the status of self-governance. It appears that this administrative arrangement fitted well with the government rhetoric of "liberating the oppressed nationalities" of the South. Consequently, the then TGE's policy initiatives managed to accommodate the basic self-governance aspirations of both larger, which had been administrative units in the past (like, Sidama) and smaller ethnic groups, which achieved a newly won administrative status, in the South at the time. This honeymoon of the transitional period, however, waned when the five regional units of transitional period consolidated into one federated unit-the SNNPRS.

In the feudal as well as the *Derg* era, however, the southern region never was a unified area in economic, cultural or political terms (Abbink, 1998). In the past, ethnic groups in the south were divided into different provinces and they were never under one administration. Therefore, there is no any historical, geographic, linguistic and other justification to merge together 56 ethno-linguistic groups in a single federated unit.

In stark contrast to Ethiopia's constitutional engineering, the FDRE constitution entitled ethnically defined groups the right to self-determination including secession (Art.39/1). While entitling ethnic groups of the south to this higher right, the government has merged together diverse ethno-linguistic groups into one federated unit from the previous five Regional units. It seems that this merger is not only contradicting with principles of the new constitution but also equally depriving their right to self-determination that they had already accorded.

Due to EPRDF's desire to sustain its control of state power, the party has gradually put efforts into administrative integration instead of national self-determination in the South, even if the national constitution gives ethnically defined groups a universal right to self-rule (Aalen 2008:190).

Following increasing violence and persistent ethnic quest, particularly Welayta, for self-governance in multi-ethnic Simen Omo zones in 2000, the government allowed the disintegration of this zone into five units: three zones- Dawro, Welayta and Gamo-Goffa zones and two special woredas- Basketo and Konta. Thus, pressing ethnic claims for self-governance at different levels and their resort to violence at times show that the merger was not the manifestation of their expressed consent of the ethno-linguistic groups of SNNPRS. Unlike a de-concentrated zone, for instance, in Oromiya regional state, the zones and special woredas in the SNNPRS are ethnically defined but multi-ethnic in nature which is an evidence for creating *minorities-within-minorities*. Demands for recognition of self-governance by many ethnic groups, namely Oyda, Goffa, Wolayita, Silte, Majangir and Sheka, except Sidama, in this regional state has not been for regional status but for the zonal or special *woreda* status that reflect their separate ethnic identity and provide, at least in principle, the opportunity of self-government. By consolidating diverse ethnic groups, the government has thus created *minority-within-minority* which is the main cause for increasing ethnic assertions, inter-ethnic tension and conflict in SNNPRS.

CREATING MINORITY-WITHIN-MINORITY: MAIN CAUSE BEHIND ETHNIC QUEST FOR SELF-GOVERNANCE

Article 45/1 of SNNPRS constitution provides a four-tier of internal administrative structure: the Regional/State level, zonal/special woreda, woreda and finally the kebele level. Currently, it is administratively divided into seventeen administrative units. From this territorial administrative arrangement, one can observe clear similarities with the national level. Those larger ethnic groups in the region have given their own "mother zone" or "special woreda" while other ethnic groups constitute a minority within one of these entities.

In the SNNPRS, only a few ethnic groups have exercised the rights to zonal or special woreda level of administration.

Most of the Southern State's 50+ ethnic groups do not have their own Zone/Special Woreda. These groups either live in a multi-ethnic zone or are a minority group in a zone dominated by another group (Beken, 2008:23).

An astonishing fact is not only the merger of 56 ethno-linguistic groups but the government's disinclination to organize many sub-Regional units even within this one federated unit in a manner that enables these diverse ethnic groups to realize their right to self-determination.

As a result, many ethnic groups were made to form a minority within one of ethnically defined zones or special woredas or made to live together in a multi-ethnic zone like Gamo Goffa zone without establishing institutional mechanism that enable them to realize their socio-economic and political interests. It is not surprising if there is resentment and at time resort to violence and conflicts by some ethno-linguistic groups, such as the Ale, Goffa, Tembaro and Danta against their minority status in the sub-Regional units dominated by another groups.

Despite the existing and increasing ethnic groups claims for self-governance in the region, the disinclination of the government to adequately address these claims and their resort to violence and conflicts have raised a considerable doubt about the wisdom of substantive autonomy rights recognized in the constitution. **The continuing dynamics of ethnic claims are adversely affecting a long period of mutual inter-dependence and co-existence among diverse ethnic groups in the region.** In addition, it is also evidence for the fact that till then marginalized and dominated ethnic groups in the south have not yet fully empowered. And yet, it is an evidence for the fact that the communities that have defined themselves along ethnic lines are denied the right to self-rule that creates a difference between the principles promised in the constitution and practice that produce violence, inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts in the SNNPRS.

INCONSISTENCY IN IMPLEMENTING THE RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION AND FEDERAL FORMULA

As a remedy to past injustice and inequality, EPRDF regime legally guaranteed ethnically defined groups the right to self-determination. While the goal of these substantive autonomy rights stated in the constitution is to find solution for ethnic claims for self-governance through legal means, some ethnic groups in the multi-ethnic SNNPRS are still battling with the state peacefully as well as violently for these legally sacred rights. This is because the rights promised for them have not yet been fully implemented.

EPRDF's power politics is in itself conflict producing: when communities that have defined themselves along ethnic lines are denied the right to self-rule in the south, it creates a difference between the principles and practice that produce anger and discontent (Aalen, 2008:190).

As a major positive departure from the past, EPRDF regime adopted ethnic-based federal formula perhaps to enable ethnic groups to administer themselves by devolving power along ethnic lines. Practically, however, some inconsistencies and mutually incompatible policies and implementation procedures have prevailed so far. This is due to the problem either inherent in the model itself or thrown up during its execution. As a result, its record has met with a varying degree of success in accommodating ethnic quest for self-governance. Accordingly, it has faced some how challenges related with emergent and existing ethnic assertions.

There emerged a number of anomalies in operationalising the federal formula on the basis of ethnicity and language. In some cases, a number of ethnic groups with sizeable population were not considered within the national federal formula, whereas the Hareri minority group, for example, was accorded the status of a "regional-state" while a large number of ethnic groups were amorphously conglomerated under the "SNNPRS" creating a further anomaly (Akliu, 2003:38).

However, the admirers have hailed this ethnic federal model as an aspect of democratization of the state and even as a model for other multi-ethnic states in Africa (Dereje, 2006; Young, 1996).

According to the 2007 Population and Housing Census, only 10 ethnic groups have a population of one million and above in Ethiopia. From these 10 major ethnic groups, five of them, namely Guragie, Hadiya, Welayta, Gamo and Sidama are from the SNNPRS. In the same census, the Hareri have a total of 31,869 or 0.04% of population of the country which is one of the smallest in the country but allowed to have their 'own mother state'. If the Hareri merit the status of a regional state, why would these five major ethnic groups choose to be in the second order "zone" rather than have their own 'mother state'?

If the population of the Hareri warrants the status of a regional state, then all language groups that have the same or higher population size must have states (Mesfin, 1999:161).

However, this comparative perspective should not be considered as the Hareri would not have a region, it is rather to show the mixed results of ethnic-based federal model and concomitant right to self-determination in addressing ethnic demands for self-governance in the south. The continuing dynamics of ethnic quest for self-governance in the south are thus not only the result of lack of respect for constitutionally fledged rights to self-determination but also inconsistency in implementing them. Thus, the FDRE constitution has bestowed substantive autonomy rights for all ethnically defined groups as a remedy for past injustice and inequality. However, some ethnic groups in the south are still battling with the state peacefully as well as violently for these legally sacred rights.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

This study has dealt with the quest for self-governance in Ethiopian federal system by taking the experience of the some of the subsumed ethnic groups of the SNNPRS. In stark contrast to Ethiopia's constitutional tradition, FDRE constitution entitled ethnically defined groups the right to self-determination including secession (art.39/1). While the EPRDF regime entitling ethnic groups of the South, the government has merged together these diverse ethnic groups without any institutional mechanisms that enable them to realize their right to self-determination. The continuing dynamics of ethnic claim for self-governance is adversely affecting the long established mutual inter-dependence and co-existence among ethnic groups in the region. From the overall conclusions, one can draw that there is a gap in the way how the constitutional provisions protect the rights of ethnic groups of the South. The self-determination right recognized in the constitution is not yet fully implemented. As a result there is continuing dynamics of ethnic claims.

RECOMMENDATION

In this article, the following two policy options are presented as viable solutions.

In the feudal as well as the Derg era, diverse ethnic groups of today's south were never under a single administration and a unified area in their socio-economic and political history. During its transitional phase, the EPRDF regime had organized five regional units (killil 7-11) by proclamation no.7/1992. Therefore, by taking into account the political, historical, linguistic and geographic contexts, including EPRDF's administrative arrangement during the transitional period, restructuring SNNPRS in a manner which reflects the essential attributes of the existing ethnic diversity is a point which is worth emphasizing in a more open-minded ways. This restructuring should be with the objectives of:

- A. Virtually ensuring the right to self-determination;
- B. Bringing administrative convenience and political symmetry;
- C. Providing diverse ethnic groups with institutional avenues at different levels of decision-making and
- D. Abating possible threat to peace and security emanating from increasing ethnic assertiveness.

Let me end on an optimistic note, in the realm of peace and security dealing with ethnic demand for recognition of ethnic identity and self-government would be important for sustainable peace and security to prevail. Whenever ethnic group demands are securitized, ethnic relations will eventually settle into a stable and peaceful pattern. However, refusing to accommodate ethnic claims through legal means can play into the hands of the lack of good governance and broken down of the mutual interdependence and co-existence in the inter-ethnic relations. This is because the feeling of being deprived and excluded by ethnic groups will clearly reinforce inter-ethnic tensions and violence. Thus, to accommodate ethnic claims in multi-ethnic southern region, federal system should be continuous and dynamic process rather than being reduced to static and permanent administrative structures.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study was specifically focused on bottom up approach for exploring ethnic quest for distinct ethnic identity and self-governance in the study regional State. As this Regional State is the most complex and diverse in terms of ethno-linguistic groups, there are several unstudied subsumed ethno-linguistic groups in the region which demands recognition for separate self-administration. Specifically, the impact of continuing dynamics of ethnic quest for self-governance on regional and national effort of realizing peace, impact on inter-ethnic relation and co-existence, socio-economic interaction and inter-dependence has remained not explained in detail in this article. These are some of the areas for further research in the study area.

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