

Full Length Research

Ethnic Federal System in Ethiopia: Origin, Ideology and Paradoxes

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Despite the evolution of multiethnic Ethiopia by territorial conquest, successive feudal regimes were embarked on hegemonic project of building a nation-state. However, this had brought the *National Questions* as the politico-ideological agenda by the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM). The ESM advocated Marxist-Leninism as their ideological curricula and promoted self-determination up to secession as a solution to the *National Questions*. Descended from the ESM, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and its satellite armed groups assumed the state power as the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) after waging a successful armed struggle against socialist military regime in 1991. As a legitimate response to the *National Questions*, the TPLF/ EPRDF adopted a federal system that was explicitly based on ethnicity and formalized ethnic rights to self-determination up to secession. By transforming itself into multi-ethnic EPRDF, the TPLF enlarged its programme and ideology nationwide with the ambition of creating a renewed, 'revolutionary-democratic centralist federalism' instead of an enforced unitary state. Accordingly, the normative base for ethnic federalism in Ethiopia is undoubtedly connected with ideology of the TPLF. With its triple radical and pioneering approaches: federalism, ethnicity and principle of self-determination, Ethiopia has gone further than any other African states and further than almost any state worldwide.

Keywords: Ethnic Federal System, National Question, Ethiopian Student Movement, Ethno-National Movements, Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front, Marxist Military Autocracy and Paradoxes

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INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia takes a special place in the contemporary African politics by adopting an ethnic-based federal system and ethnic right to self-determination up to secession by a political regime that came to power after hard won victory over the military socialist regime in 1991. The ethno-nationalist armed forces led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) ascended to

state power as a post-Marxist-Leninist vanguard party, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The 'revolutionary democracy' was instituted by the EPRDF as political guiding state ideology (Aalen, 2006; Hagmann and Abbink, 2011). The ethno-federal system is explicitly based on ethnicity as a fundamental principle of state organization, representation and political mobilization. Ethnicity was thus formalized under ethno

federation as one of the key instruments of public life. Accordingly, the existing constitution of 1995 that institutionalized the federal system, ethnicity and ethnic right to self-determination up to secession was emerged out of the collapse of the communist *Derge* regime and the disintegration of centralized authoritarian modern Ethiopian state structure.

The study is intended to analyze the politics of the state and its guiding ideology and associated challenges. In light of this, the study has the following objectives. Firstly, following Boogman (1980:7), any study on 'federalism can only be adequately dealt with if it is studied in conjunction with the entire historical development', the study describes the historical backgrounds for instituting unique politics in Africa: ethno-federalism and ethnic rights to self-determination up to secession in Ethiopia. Secondly, the study examines the ideological motives behind adopting ethnic federalism by focusing on the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM), from which the EPRDF is descended, and emergence of the dominant Marxism–Leninism ideology as dominant political ideology since 1960s. Thirdly, the study investigate the origin and ideology of the TPLF to understand the manner in which the federal bargain was offered and other key historical developments that had left their indelible mark on the ideology and institution of federalism since 1991. Fourthly, the study also discusses the promise and paradox after two decades of federal experimenting along with the right to self-determination in the country in terms of realizing fully fledged federal system, a multiparty democracy, ethnic autonomy, political pluralism and others. Fifth, the study dealt with as briefly as possible the enduring debates and controversies on the ethnic-based federal system in Ethiopia.

The key knowledge contribution of this study is adding a new view and arguments to move the scholarly studies and debates in the Ethiopia federal system forward by analyzing the origin and ideology of the ethnic federal system and associated paradoxes from historic perspective. In terms of methodology, the study tries to chronologically analyze the Ethiopian politics since 1960s to the present. The study is based on the analytical review of existing literatures and documents.

The coverage of the points described, the paper is organized into the following sections. The first section emphasized on the rise of Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) and *the National Question* as an ideological base for ethno-federation in Ethiopia. In the second section, Marxist-military autocracy and emergence of ethno-national armed movements are explored. The origin and the ideology of the TPLF are discussed in the third section. The fourth part is devoted to the coming of the EPRDF and ethnic federal system and its associated challenges in Ethiopia. The last section of the study

presents conclusions of the study.

The Rise of Ethiopian Student Movement and the *National Questions* in Ethiopia

Any study on federalism can only be adequately dealt with if it is studied in conjunction with the entire historical development (Boogman, 1980:7). To understand the historic factors for reconstructing the Ethiopian state along ethnic federal line in the post 1990s, insights from history are particularly important. As noted by Czelaw Jesman (1963:1), 'Ethiopia is a country burdened by its past'. Investigating this 'historic burden' is thus significant to understand the historical and the ideological circumstances that led to the establishment of ethnic-based federalism and formalizing ethnic rights to self-determination up to secession in Ethiopia. This section discusses the territorial military conquest and subsequent attempt of building a nation–state that had finally brought the *National Question* as politico-ideological agenda to describe deep-rooted ethnic inequality and injustice and a commitment by the student movements to Marxist–Leninist approach to nationalities in Ethiopia since 1960s.

In fact, the country has a unique history in Africa. Ethiopia is one of the ancient countries in north–east Africa. It has a long history of independent statehood that goes back at least three thousand years (Bahru, 2002). However, the modern Ethiopian state was essentially created in the 2nd half of the 19th century by internally driven territorial expansions of the Abyssinian Empire, a historic central and northern Ethiopia. Unlike the African states established by external European colonial conquest, the formation of modern Ethiopian state was the result of internally driven territorial expansion. Ethiopia was never colonized by the Europeans, except brief Italian occupation from 1935–1941. Despite this stark difference of its origins from those of African states, 'Ethiopia shares a colonial legacies and post-colonial African states problems of state–building due to internal expansionist conquest' (Mengisteab, 2007:66). This process of internally carving the state by the expansionist conquest was not impacted differentially from the external colonial conquest in the rest of Africa.

During the Europeans' scramble for Africa in the 1880s, emperor Menelik II (1889–1913) was busy as he had started the process of territorial conquest that was culminated in the creation of modern Ethiopia (Bahru, 2002). This military conquest was coincided with the European colonization of Africa. Accordingly, emperor Menelik II was viewed by scholars as 'the only black African leader who actively participated in the scramble for Africa' (Teshale, 1995: xxv). Using unbalanced military power, Emperor Menelik II incorporated the lands and peoples of the south, east and west into an empire

which became the modern state of Ethiopia. The military conquest successfully tripled the size of the empire and brought in not less than several dozens of ethnic groups of diverse language and cultures (Young, 1996; Merera, 2003a). Unlike other African states, the ethnic diversity is not the result of colonial imperialist designs; instead it resulted from this territorial expansion.

The Ethiopia of today was born from the military conquest and its shape consecrated by the international recognition of the boundaries following the battle of Adwa (1896) in which the Ethiopian forces defeated the Italians (Bahru, 2002). The existing large societal diversity is therefore of much more recent origin in Ethiopia. The consequence of territorial conquest was far more brutal and devastating for the conquered peoples from the south, east and west. The outcome of the conquest and incorporation into the emerging empire was a dual oppression, both national and class. The conquest created the north–South dichotomy: one polity but two markedly different north–south systems (Merera, 2003a). The political institutions that were used to administer the south were distinctly different from the north. The pattern of administration that emerged in the south followed two broad trends – those southern rulers who peacefully submitted to emperor Menelik II were allowed to retain some degree of autonomy. In contrast, bulk of the southern territories fell to Menelik's military chiefs and the nobility as tenants (Bahru, 2002: 87-9; Markakis, 1974: 104-6). Thus, the creation of the Ethiopian state did not, however, give rise to an alternative nation building strategy.

Many conquered groups in Ethiopia remained marginal to the polity, to the economy and the exercise of administration (Abbink, 1997:164; Young, 1996: 532). Just like the leaders of the post–colonial African states, Ethiopia's state–building strategy after military conquest had been characterized by 'a nation–state building process by assimilating other ethno–linguistic groups into the core culture of the empire builders' (Mengistebab, 1997:120). For the largest part of the 20th century, the consecutive Ethiopian monarchs strived to transform the heterogeneous groups into a homogeneous Ethiopian nation. The strategy used for a nation–state building project did not include the creation of a new identity, but the propagation of an existing identity–the identity of the conqueror–as the national identity (Beken, 2007:106; Merera, 2003a:61; Markakis, 1974). Concretely, the regime strived to disavowal of and the attempt to erase ethnic identity of the conquered peoples and to replace it with an Amhara identity.

The nation building strategy further consolidated under the rule of emperor Haileselassie I, who took the throne after the reign of Empress Zawditu (1916–1930), the daughter of Menelik II. Emperor Haileselassie I ruled Ethiopia first as a regent during the reign of Empress Zawditu and later as emperor for 44 years from 1930–

1974. He further consolidated the policy of a nation–state building project and centralization of his predecessors with a renewed vigour and tenacity. The period which marked the high point of Ethiopian feudalism also witnessed its decay and eventual demise in 1974 (Bahru, 2002).

The 1960s saw many changes that had shaped the history and politics of contemporary Ethiopia. The absolute feudal imperial regime began to face multi–faceted oppositions since the beginning of the 1960s. Bahru Zewde, Emeritus professor and exceptional historian in the Ethiopian historiography, has noted that "beginning in conspiratorial fashion, opposition to the regime reached its climax in the Ethiopian Student movements" (2002:178). Two interrelated factors seem to have operated as reasons for a shift in the nature of opposition against imperial regime. The first is the abrogation of Ethio–Eritrean federation in 1962 that led one of the Africa's longest civil war between different Eritrean separatist movements, such as the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), and successive Ethiopian regimes until 1991 (Markakis, 1974:362; Young, 1997:533). Eritrea was the former colony of Italy and federated with Ethiopia in 1952 under a United Nations (UN) sanctioned autonomous federal arrangement (Tsegay, 2010). Since the failure of the Ethio–Eritrean federalism in 1962, a nationalist war started in Eritrea for complete secession. This Eritrean Nationalism was to play a particularly influential role in the origins and evolution of what came to be known as the *National Question* in the Ethiopian Student movements (Bahru, 2014:67; Vaughan, 2003:130-1; Balsvik, 1985:278). Though they played decisive role in raising and organizing the debates in *National Question* thesis within the student circle, the Eritrean insurgents were later advanced the colonial thesis and advocated complete independence from Ethiopia.

The Second is the rise of increasingly active and radical Ethiopian student movement (ESM), from students of emperor Hailselassie I University, or later Addis Ababa University. Bahru Zewde, one of the students involved in the Ethiopian Student Movements, has concisely mentioned that 'the most implacable opposition to the feudal regime came from the students' (2002:220). This student movement constitutes a watershed in modern Ethiopian political history. In the course of the 1960s, this movement became one of the most important actors in undermining the legitimacy of the imperial regime arguably as transformative of the political culture in Ethiopia in a situation of great isolation and an environment hardly conducive for its development (Markakis, 1974). The students articulated the deep–rooted ethnic problems and inequality in terms of the *National Question* and a revolutionary slogan of *land to the tiller* (Bahru, 2014; Markakis, 1974). Apart from

Eritrean insurgency and other rebels on the periphery, it was the students who led the opposition against the Emperor Haileselassie I regime at the centre, as it did later against the *Derge* regime.

John Young has pointed out that 'the student movement had a pan-Ethiopian character, and focused on class rather than ethnic contradictions' (1996:533). The nationality issue was a taboo subject, and even after years of fighting in Eritrea and elsewhere, was not part of public discourse. Student writing extolled Ethiopian nationalism, a sentiment perceived to transcend all other identities and loyalties in Ethiopia. Most students were thus 'hostile towards the political assertion of ethnicity' (Kiflu, 1993:52). However, student movement opened a new chapter for ethnic politics in the country. Inspired by the Marxist-Leninism philosophy, students ideological curricula of the *National Question* (national oppression thesis), the students popularized the right to self-determination of nations and nationalities including secession as the political solution to this *Nationality Questions* in Ethiopia (Merera, 2003a:97-9; Bahru, 2014:127; Young, 1996:534). However, the students believed that the overthrow of the imperial regime and the end of class exploitation and ethnic oppression would remove the grounds for secession (Pateman, 1990, cited in Young, 1996). This shows the fact that the students rhetorically emphasized secession right just to signify the extent of freedom for all ethnic groups in Ethiopia. Though ethnic diversity was an existing fact, it had been denied proper recognition in Ethiopia until 1974.

The students and ethno-nationalist movements that emerged out of the student movement were heavily influenced by the Marxist-Leninist/Stalinist theory of nationalities. Many of the concepts used to discuss problems of ethnic relations in Ethiopia were copied from Russian revolutionaries (Asnake, 2009:63). The students, therefore, not only considered Ethiopia akin to Tsarist Russia as a 'prison house of nationalities' but also sought to 'resolve' the problem through Stalinist principles of self-determination, which profess the right of a 'nation' to 'arrange its life in the way it wishes' either 'on the basis of autonomy', 'federal relations with other nations' or 'complete secession'. According to Stalin (1954), the theory of nationalities further recognized the sovereignty and equality of 'nations' (cited in Asnake, 2009: 63).

The students used ethnicity under the banner of the *National Question* and played a central role in the political construction of ethnic identity and ethnicity in today's Ethiopia. As a pro-Marxist-Leninist, the student movement brought the notion of 'Nations', 'Nationalities' and 'Peoples' to signify ethnic identities and diversity against the age-old feudalist disguise of ethnic diversity. Indeed, a nation-state building hegemonic project was therefore ended by making the issue of ethnicity and ethnic right to self-determination up to secession the

students' main political ideological agenda or as became a driving revolutionary force for subsequent ethno-nationalist armed movements that had been descended from students.

The radicalization of the students took a new turn towards the beginning of the 1970s. In November 1969, Wallelegn Makonnen, who was one of the prominent student leader of Ethiopian Student Movement, published an article entitled on *the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia* that well ignited a political bombshell to feudal regime and divulging the national oppression to academic and political milieus. In this article, he challenged the very idea of Ethiopian unity by saying:

Ethiopia is not really one nation. It is made up of a dozen nationalities, with their own language, ways of dressing, history, social organization and territorial entity. And what else is a nation? Is it not made of a people with a particular tongue, particular ways of dressing, a particular history, particular social and economic organization? Then may I conclude that in Ethiopia there is the Oromo nation, the Amhara nation, the Tigre nation, the Wellamo nation, the Adere nation, the Gurage nation, the Sidama nation and, however, much you may not like it the Somali nation (Walelegn, 1969:1-2).

As the opposition grew in size and strength, an ageing Emperor Haileselassie I proved unable to contain it, and it was the military who stepped into the power void in 1974 (Young, 1996:533; Bahru, 2002:228). In a long recorded history of Ethiopia, Emperor Haileselassie I enjoyed the most peaceful years of reign, except for the short-lived Italian occupation. In 1974, revolutionary upheavals rocked the country. The failure of the feudal regime to respond to popular demands for reforms eroded its popular supports. Finally, the 44 years long rule in Ethiopia was overthrown by the popular revolution in 1974. Although they had been calling and fighting for it, even the student movement was unprepared or politically unorganized to handle and direct the revolution and assume political power. In the absence of organized political parties therefore the military took the advantage of the political vacuum and controlled the state power (Bahru, 2002; Merera, 2003b).

What is surprising, however, is that there were contending nationalist perspectives within the student movement that led to not only division on the issue of their key political agendas but also beginning of armed movements in Ethiopia. The differences basically concern the way they interpret the historical road to modern Ethiopia and the political solutions and strategy of mass mobilizations they provide for the country problem. Their competing perspective regarding the historical road to modern Ethiopia during Menelik II ranges from (re)

unification, military conquest to colonization (Merera, 2003a:94; Asnake, 2009:63). While recognizing national oppression or the *Nationality Question* under imperial regimes, pan–Ethiopian nationalist groups advocated as a solution *class based struggle* instead of ethnic one in Ethiopia. They promoted Ethiopian nationalism by claiming that the state has existed for millennia successfully countering ethnic and regional challenges, and forging a distinct national identity (Bahru, 2002:260). The assimilation of periphery cultures into the Amhara or Amhara/Tigray core culture made the creation of the Ethiopian nation possible. They were mainly represented by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and All Ethiopian Socialist Movement known popularly by Amharic as MEISON (Merera, 2003a:96-97; Solomon, 1993:142).

On the other hand, extremist groups were advancing colonial thesis and provided as a solution *ethnic based struggle* for complete secession from Ethiopia. Those who uphold the colonial thesis, mainly the Eritrean People Liberation Movements and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) advocate the national oppression and ethnic injustice more seriously and advocate complete secession as a panacea for the country's political malaise (Chanie, 1998:101; Hassen, 1996:77). While in favor of ethnic based struggle, Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) has long been advancing *the national oppression thesis*, which seemed more appealing to the Tigrayan people. Although at one point they were advocating secession from Ethiopia, the Tigrayans consider themselves as an important component part of historic Ethiopia and search for solution within the framework of greater Ethiopia (Merera, 2003a:99 Markakis, 1987: 254; Asebe, 2007:31).

Both political movements that emerged in the post 1970s out of the student movement in Ethiopia accepted the Marxist–Leninist ideology and Stalin's theory of nationalities. As discussed earlier, their differences, however, remained mainly on the issues related to the strategy of mobilization that was either class or ethnic based mobilization and the extent to which the ethnic groups would exercise self–determination including secession (Markakis, 1987:254-7; Young, 1997:153-54). Accordingly, Pan–Ethiopianist movements, like the EPRP and the MEISON, gave primacy to *national oppression or class contradiction* in their political discourses and mobilize class–based strategy than ethnic based mobilization. In contrast, ethno–nationalist movements, like the EPLF and the OLF, put their emphasis on *colonial thesis*, unlike the TPLF that emphasis *national oppression* but ethnic based mobilization, and sought to use the strategy of ethnic (their presumed ethnic constituencies) based mobilization. The ethno–nationalist movements had crucial differences on the question of secession. While the EPRP and MEISON were reluctant to endorse secession, 'the TPLF, the OLF and other

ethnic movements advocated ethnic self–determination up to and including secession' (Markakis, 1987:254-7).

Basing their claim on the legacy of Italian colonization, the Eritrean People Liberation Front (EPLF) and other Eritrean movements pressed for the complete independence from Ethiopia that was finally decided in May 1991. In addition, the politically organized Oromo Movements, like the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) appear to prefer an independent Oromia (Merera, 2003a:101; Alem, 2005; Hassen, 1996:77). The Africa's 30 years civil war by the EPLF was ended in 1991 by the secession of Eritrea and the control of state power by ethno–nationalist forces led by TPLF/EPRDF forces after hard–won victory over the military regime. Thus, the EPLF and the TPLF have consecutively succeeded in their *national oppression and colonization theses*. However, the OLF and other groups, like Ogaden (Ethiopian Somali) National Liberation Front (ONLF), are facing with a seemingly endless secessionist struggle in Ethiopia. They are the only secessionist movements in the post–federal Ethiopia.

Marxist Military Autocracy and Emergence of Ethno–National Movements

The revolutionary upheaval came in 1974 but there was no properly organized political party among the students that could give the necessary leadership to the revolution (Merera, 2003b; Bahru, 2002). Although the two leftist political parties, MEISON as of 1968 and EPRP as of 1972, were in existence prior to the revolution, they had remained clandestine and limited their activities to the student constituency from which both originated. When the revolution broke out in February 1974, in the absence of a credible and organized civilian opposition, the military easily took over the leadership of the revolution by exploiting the power vacuum (Merera, 2003b). After the 'creeping' coup that ousted the aging emperor, the military known as *Derge*, which is literally *committee*, assumed full state power in September 1974 (Bahru, 2002:233-6; Vaughan, 2003:146).

The military wanted to transform the country without making a major break with the imperial past in terms of the *National Question* and wanted to lead a revolution without the revolutionaries (Merera, 2003b). To meet popular pressure and demand for radical change aroused by the students, the *Derge* regime (1974–91) adopted several radical measures that destroyed the material and ideological basis of the imperial regime and undertook a fundamental transformation of Ethiopian society (Young, 1997:534; Asnake, 2009:56). It seems that when coming to power, the *Derge* had no–well–thought–out of political programme and bereft of political ideology (Markakis, 2000:15; Merera, 2003a:82). However, the regime rapidly adopted a radical 'Marxist–Leninist' ideology,

which has been the most influential ideological curricula in the Ethiopian politics since 1960s till this day, and revolutionary terminology as a guiding principle of the state and the socialist solution to the key political agenda of the student movement: the *National Question* in Ethiopia (Mengisteb, 1997:121; Bahru, 2002:243; Clapham, 2002). The *Derge* replaced the monarchical absolutism with military Marxism as the ideology for re-building the nation. The regime therefore used this ideology to destroy the old social structure, to force the pace of development, to further centralize state power and militarize its apparatus.

Despite turning overnight into Marxist revolutionaries, the regime failed to resolve the national/regional inequalities in the country. However, the *Derge* was quick to theoretically proclaim an end to ethnic oppression, recognized ethnic diversity as nationalities, and declared the equality of all language and cultures in Ethiopia (Tsegay, 2010). Given its socialist credentials and the long-running ideological debates within the Ethiopian Leftist parties over the issue of self-determination of nationalities including the right to secession, the option of secession had never presented by the *Derge* except the right to internal self-determination by its 1976 Programme for the National Democratic Revolution (PNDR). The regime was very much committed to the Ethiopian nationalism with its vague slogan *Ethiopia Tikdam* (Ethiopia first in *Amharic*) and emphasized the project of 'nation-building' and 'socialism' (Merera, 2003a:80; Clapham, 1988). It was nationalistic more than revolutionary. Accordingly, the regime pronouncements were careful to refer only to nationalities, never to nations, which, in Marxist terms, might be expected to enjoy potential rights of secession and independence (Vaughan, 2003:149-50).

To destroy economic and material basis of the old feudal regime and to create foundation for socialism, the *Derge* nationalized the land in 1975 that put an end to the landlordism and tenancy in Ethiopia. The greatest beneficiaries were the tenants and the landless (Markakis, 2000:16; Bahru, 2002:242-3; Merera, 2003a:79). Despite a glimmer of hope, several military movements mushroomed throughout the country against the regime. Instead of sharing power with either the politically conscious middle classes or the emerging regional and ethnic elites, the regime pursued a politics of exclusion of civilians, who persistently and consistently fought for social change, and policy of eliminating all challengers, even within itself. Thus, it had no intention to allow meaningful mass participation in the government let alone weakening the power of the centre. It intensified the policy of centralization and arbitrary rule typical of its predecessor. As a result, the military regime was almost immediately challenged from different directions (Young, 1996:534; Bahru, 2002:254; Merera, 2003a:84-5).

To respond to increasing oppositions, the military

regime promoted militaristic nationalism and brutal governance system (Clapham, 1994; Temesgen, 2011). The most drastic challenge to the survival of the military regime came from the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that was officially launched in 1975. Despite its commitment throughout its rule, the final blow to the military regime came in 1991 mainly from these two liberation fronts'. The other offspring of student movement that emerged to challenge the regime was the Oromo Liberation Front that came to its existence since 1976 to secessionist struggle for Oromo independence (Bahru, 2002:262-3). The *Derge* resorted to military buildup in order to suppress these armed movements. The *Derge's* grand failure was, however, considering all the opposition groups as anti-Ethiopian nationalism and using force to eradicate them. In addition, the regime started a campaign of mass killings, the so-called, *Red Terror*, in which thousands of the regime's opponents were brutally murdered on the streets (ibid:247; Woodward, 2003:91). The outcome was rule by terror and the development of a completely anti-democratic situation in all urban areas.

The end result of military rule was neither fully a positive social transformation nor a successful 'nation-building' project. But rather, it was one of the most destructive periods in the country's long-recorded history. The *Derge* regime applied what can be termed 'military methods to solve all the country's societal problems' (Merera, 2003:150-1). Thus, the military junta had exacerbated the internal turmoil in the country. It was actually triggered more than it had solved more deep-rooted problems and devastating armed conflicts in the country. The civil war was intensified in the country. Thus, the military junta's rule, instead of solving daunting societal problems, provoked massive resistance from many quarters. After the persistent armed struggle, the dominant ethno-nationalist armed groups, such as the TPLF, the EPLF and the OLF, were succeeded in forcing the military regime to implode and collapse in 1991. After the control of Asmara, the EPLF declared the independence of Eritrea. Transforming itself from a uni-ethnic autonomy movement to a pan-Ethiopian movement by establishing a post-Marxist-Leninist vanguard party, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the TPLF controlled Addis Ababa in May 1991. As part of transforming itself into a 'multiethnic' liberation front, the TPLF forged separate organizations for the Amhara and Oromo and for various ethnic groups after controlling Addis Ababa (Clapham, 2002; Merera, 2003a).

In reality, the creation of the EPRDF has helped the TPLF to play a role beyond the bounds of Tigray province (Markakis, 1994: 230; Young, 1997). Accordingly, the EPRDF is comprised of four ethnic organizations namely, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Amhara

National Democratic Movement (ANDM), Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) and Southern Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Movement (SEPDM). After taking control of the state power, the TPLF/EPRDF was facilitated the separation of Eritrea, renounced long-held Ethiopian policies based on state centralization; it has proceeded with the devolution of powers to the regions, and through its new constitution has granted the regions the right to peacefully leave the federation by secession (Young, 1996:542). At the onset, the OLF formed coalition with the TPLF/EPRDF in the Transitional government in 1991. However, only after a year in 1992, the OLF renounced the coalition government when the TPLF created its own Oromo satellite organization, the OPDO and has resumed its secessionist struggle (Asnake, 2009:189; Aalen, 2006: 257; 2002:7).

The Origin and Ideology of the TPLF and Emergence of EPRDF

The origin of both the EPRDF and ethnic-based federal system in Ethiopia is related with the emergence of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the province of Tigray and ascendance to state power as the EPRDF after hard won victory over the military regime in 1991. Theoretically, as noted by King (1982:12-3), 'any federal system has its corresponding ideological disposition'. Thus, the study of origin and ideology of the TPLF help to examine the normative bases and the manner in which the federal bargain was offered by the TPLF/EPRDF as approach for reconstructing the Ethiopian state. This section, therefore, discusses the origin of the TPLF and its motives to adopt ethnic-based federalism around the Marxist-Leninist principle of self-determination up to secession in Ethiopia after controlling the state power as the EPRDF in 1991.

In northern part of today's federal Ethiopia, Tigray regional state is a home for the famous Aksum obelisk and the source of ancient Ethiopian civilization. The Tigray province also forms the heart of the ancient Abyssinian kingdom. The Tigrayan youth who formed the TPLF developed their ideology in the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Young, 1997:23; Marcus, 2002:221). For my specific enquiry of the normative base of ethnic federalism, the genesis of the TPLF can arguably related with two interrelated historical factors:

Firstly, the emergence of the TPLF related with the loss of their centrality in the Ethiopian power politics in favour of the Amhara after the death of Tigrayan emperor Yohannes IV in 1898. The loss of centrality in the power politics and a nation-state building project, which prompted Amharization policy, by suppressing other ethnic groups were presented as motivating factors for emergence of Tigrayan nationalism and movements since

1960s (Young, 1997:31-2; Adhana, 1998:47-48; Vaughan, 2003:161-163). The TPLF was born out of the conception that the modern Ethiopian state was created and emerged as a unitary centralized state by undermining and disregarding the rights of various ethnic communities that constituted the state. Thus, the TPLF emphasized that Ethiopia need to be taken apart and put together again by respecting the identities and autonomy of every group (Young, 1997:31-2; Clapham, 2002:26). Since the death of emperor Yohannes IV, the Tigrayans were reduced from a regional power broker to a minor and junior partner status to Amhara elites' dominated state. Against their ethnic marginalized position, the TPLF fought for position, status, and employment in a multi-ethnic state dominated by Shoan Amharas. The Tigrayan struggle was both a continuation of a centuries-old rivalry and also involved interests in the acquisition and articulation of various rights for their community (Young, 1997:31).

Thus, the nature of Tigrayan nationalism is a compound of aspirations for hegemony and struggle against Amhara domination and oppression via a modern education and centralization of power in Addis Ababa (Teshale, 1995:175). The history of Tigray since 1889 was full of conspiracy 'against Tigray emerging as a fully fledged nation' and the subversion of Tigray's identity' (Adhana, 1998:47). He has further noted that the newly introduced system of state education, which promoted Amharanization, not only constituted an onslaught on the language of and culture of the Tigray, but also worked to distance the Tigray from the Amhara concept of the Ethiopian nation-state (ibid). Thus, for a people aptly described as the 'cultural aristocrats' of Ethiopia, Tigray's decline fuelled a sense of national grievance which readily found expression in hostility to the Amhara elite who dominated the central state (Young, 1997:31). It was in these circumstances that the TPLF established in 1975.

Secondly, the Tigrayan youth who formed the TPLF developed their ideology in the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s and 1970s which fought the old regime and the military dictatorship on a pan-Ethiopian basis (Young, 1997:32). The Meles Zenawi, the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, and the other Tigrayan students were leaders of student movements. As discussed above, the students were strongly influenced by the Marxist-Leninist understanding of the *Nationality Question* and advocated self-determination up to secession for ethnic groups in Ethiopia. Being part of the student movement, the TPLF adopted the Marxist-Leninist understanding of nationalities and opted for ethnic based mobilization for resolving the *National Question* (ibid: 83). The Tigrayan students established the TPLF immediately after the popular revolution of 1974 that was basically the outcome of the student movement but ended up in failure due to the military coup. In these

chaotic conditions, a small group of university students launched a national liberation struggle in early 1975 from the desperately poor province of Tigray as the TPLF (ibid: 16).

Furthermore, the origin of TPLF from student movement at that time signifies an accurate assessment of the revolutionary possibilities instead of a retreat into ethnic parochialism. The TPLF took the *National Question* in Ethiopia as an immediate question that had to be resolved through self-determination for either Tigray or for entire ethnic groups in Ethiopia. The most serious challenge to military rule came from the TPLF and the EPLF. As discussed above, the military junta was to cause incalculable damage to the country and its people by failing a popular revolution that promised the broad masses of Ethiopia freedom, social justice, peace, and prosperity in a just and democratic state. As it failed to solve fundamental country issues, except using military methods to solve all the country's societal problems, the *Derge* faced massive resistance from many quarters of the country. The TPLF and other liberation forces finally sealed the fate of the regime in May 1991

At the beginning, the TPLF did not clearly define the 'Tigrayan Question' (Alemseged, 1998:199). It remained unclear whether the national self-determination for Tigrayan meant secession or only regional autonomy within an Ethiopian framework. In its first anniversary of the organization in 1976, the TPLF issued a Manifesto that declared its stands for the formation of the 'People's Democratic Republic of Tigray' by seceding from Ethiopia (Young, 1997: 99; Marcus, 2002: 223). However, the front later made clear that it did not consider secession as the only option. The secessionist idea was not supported by either the majority members of the Front or by the people of Tigray, who constituted the historic core of the Ethiopian polity (Aregawi, 2004: 591). However, the TPLF does not abandon the idea of secession altogether.

The TPLF made 'Tigrayan Question' subject to political changes in Ethiopia (Alemseged, 1998:199; Aregawi, 2004:591). The TPLF never abandoned the idea of secession completely during the struggle against the *Derge*. The TPLF stated that if the oppression and exploitation of the Tigrayan people continued, it would mean the 'creation of an independent' Tigray (Young, 1997:100). Neither did the movement specify how national self-determination should be constitutionally, institutionally and practically entrenched. This self-determination could result in anything from 'autonomy, federation, confederation, up to and including independence' (Markakis, 1987: 254). Until this day, it is difficult to ascertain whether the independent Tigray option is completely abandoned or kept latent for the time being as the TPLF has transformed itself from the antitheses of the Ethiopian state to the owner and custodian of the Ethiopian state under the EPRDF

(Berhanu, 2007: 70).

The TPLF took several adjustments in terms of mobilization and political orientation in late 1980s. After liberating the entire Tigray province from the central authority in 1989, the TPLF adopted a new strategies and motives. However, this change of strategy to continue the fight by transforming itself from a uni-ethnic autonomy movement to a pan-Ethiopian movement is still debatable. Some argue that it was due to the fear that the Tigray province could still be re-occupied or became a target of a harsh punitive military hit by the central military government if not supported by the liberation of other ethnic groups in Ethiopia (Marcus, 2002:229). It could be either the fear that an independent Tigray province may not be a viable option in terms of economic consideration (Berhanu, 2007:70; Merera, 2003a:56) or the intent to play a national role in larger Ethiopia by restoring the centrality of Tigrayan elite in the reordering of the Ethiopian state and society (Asnake, 2009:69; Merera, 2003a).

Whatever the reasons for strategic re-consideration, the TPLF transformed itself into a multi-national liberation front as the EPRDF in 1990. With the support of the EPLF, and lesser extent OLF, this new TPLF led EPRDF defeated the *Derge's* armies and forced Mengistu Hailemariam to flee to Zimbabwe in May 1991 (Young, 1997; Merera, 2004). In reality, the creation of the EPRDF has helped the TPLF to play a role beyond the bounds of Tigray province (Markakis, 1994: 230). In the same vein, John Young has also noted that 'the best means for the TPLF to retain a leading position in Ethiopia, where the Tigrayans constitute a small proportion of the country's population, is to maintain an ethnic-based coalition with elements of the numerically superior Oromo and the historically dominant Amhara' (1996: 534). By transforming itself from the TPLF to the EPRDF, the TPLF was succeeded in controlling the central position that they had lost to the Amhara elite since the death of Emperor Yohannes IV in 1898. As noted earlier, the EPRDF is comprised of four recently established ethnic organizations to represent other parts of Ethiopia. As the EPRDF, the TPLF enlarged its programme nationwide with the ambition of creating a renewed, 'revolutionary-democratic centralist federalism' instead of an enforced unitary state (Abbink, 2006; Hagmann and Abbink, 2011). Thus, the normative base for ethnic federalism in Ethiopia is undoubtedly connected with the initial convictions of the TPLF.

The Coming of the EPRDF and Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia

In its national politics, Ethiopia has witnessed a major transition that place the Ethiopian state in a new foundation. By 1991, Ethiopia was back to its Menelikian

borders. Eritrea became a *de facto* independent state; the Abyssinians were yet again in power—through the descendants of the Tigrayan Emperor Yohannes IV, predecessor of Emperor Menelik II (Aalen, 2002: 6). The July 1991 conference was the first step in adopting the Transitional Charter that led to the formation of an interim government led by the EPRDF. The charter recognized the Eritrea's secession and made an explicit provision that the right to self-determination including secession was the inviolable right of the 'nations', 'nationalities and 'peoples' of Ethiopia as a legitimate and appropriate response to *Nationalities Question*, which was for long articulated by the student movement in Ethiopia since 1960s. This was a bold move in a country whose immediate past was marked by a strong emphasis on a nation state building and the inviolability of its unity.

In stark contrast to strong unitary nation state in the past, the FDRE constitution of 1995 adopted ethnic based federal system. As it has been noted earlier on, the birth of federal system relates to the historic trajectories of building a nation-state through ethnic assimilation that gave rise to the *National Question* as the politico-ideological agenda and the emergence of Marxism-Leninism as the dominant ideology of opposition against imperial regime since 1960s. Accordingly, as a legitimate and appropriate response to *the Nationalities Question*, the federal system formalized ethnicity and the right to self-determination up to secession. As descendent of Student movement, the TPLF/EPRDF is strongly influenced by the radical Marxist-Leninist or Stalinist ideology of *Nationalities Questions*.

The TPLF/EPRDF has repeatedly emphasized its debt to those elements of the Ethiopian student movement, who first elucidated notions of self-determination of nationalities within the Ethiopian empire state, and laid the ideological basis for political mobilization on the basis of 'nationality' (Vaughan, 2003:129). In 1991 other members of the Transitional Government joined them in averring that it was only then—twenty years later—that the student movement was finally 'coming to power' (ibid). In this regard, Teshale has also noted that 'the *National-Question*—comes—first—wing of the student movement had won over those who claimed that class and economy were the crucial issues to understand Ethiopia' (1995:170). As offspring of the student movement and the leading force within the EPRDF, the TPLF was the major architect behind the Ethiopian federalism, offering 'the federal bargain'. The ideological background for ethnic federalism is the principle of self-determination up to secession, which is undoubtedly connected to the TPLF's initial conviction. The unitary past and its handling of ethnic diversity and subsequent convictions of ethno-nationalist forces as a solution for political crisis in Ethiopia is therefore part of what shaped the trend to contemporary ethnic federalism.

Many African states have introduced territorial and non-territorial measures to accommodate their ethnically diverse populations, ranging from federalism in Nigeria, to the moderate regional devolution in South Africa, and the unbalanced union of Zanzibar and Tanganyika in Tanzania (Aalen, 2006: 243). As part of accommodating diversity, a radical transformation has taken place in the political structure of Ethiopia since 1990s. This is because; Ethiopia has adopted a federal system that grants ethnic right to self-determination up to secession and that use ethnicity as its key instrument of state formation. With its triple radical and pioneering approaches: federalism, ethnicity and principle of self-determination, Ethiopia has gone further than any other African states and further than almost any state worldwide in promoting ethnic diversity through a federal system (Aalen, 2006:243; Clapham, 2002: 27; Hagmann & Abbink, 2011:579). These three constitutional triplets have all been alien to political system until they all showed up together in the FDRE constitution. Ethnicity, which is a layer of the federalism today, also was not part of the normative politico-legal discourse. Self-determination, including secession, is not an all too familiar term in the Ethiopian legal system, either.

Promise and Paradox of Ethnic Federal System in Ethiopia

Riker has pointed out that 'there is no causal relationship between federalism and freedom' (1964: 13). Riker describes the linkage between federalism and the guarantee for freedom as an 'ideological fallacy', and argues that writers of federal constitutions have been more concerned with practical considerations of expanding government rather than the ideological considerations of guaranteeing freedoms. This argument implies that the political use of federalism is not necessarily guided by ideological considerations, but rather by pragmatic decisions by political leaders who seek to benefit from state building and institutional reconstruction, rather than moral and philosophical virtues. To understand the formal functioning of federal systems, it is necessary to undertake the analysis beyond the formal governmental structures. This also requires an analysis of the interaction of societies, structures and processes, identifying the distinct political uses of federalism to understand its normative base (Burgess, 1993:104; Watts, 1994). Federalism is a function not of constitutions but of societies. The federal system should not be judged by its federal government and its legal structures, but by the way social, political and economic interests were organized (Livingston, 1956). With this in mind, I will discuss generally the promise and paradox of ethnic federal system in Ethiopia.

Firstly, despite the constitutional commitment for federal system and generously granting broader powers

to the regional states, a centralized federal system with monolithic power structure has emerged in Ethiopia. With the exception of opening space for linguistic and ethnic cultural autonomy, so far regional states cannot exercise political autonomy due to the emergence of a dominant one-party system under the EPRDF. The ethnic-based federal system is overly centralized and operated almost like a unitary centralized state (Keller, 2004; Aalen, 2006).

There is a strong similarity between the federalism of the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia in terms of the centralization of power by a vanguard political party (Asnake, 2009:66). The EPRDF like the communist parties of the former Soviet Union has been playing a dominant and 'vanguard' political party role in Ethiopia. The promises for 'shared-rule' and 'self-rule' remain unfulfilled in Ethiopia. The centralized authoritarian governance precludes regional state autonomy (Assefa, 2012). This has continued recalling the features of autocratic political culture of the past. The federation operates more like a unitary state under centralist and vanguard party rule based on the Leninist political heritage of 'democratic centralism' (Hagmann & Abbink, 2011:584; Assefa, 2012:464). The centralization of the federal system is a paradox to broader autonomy constitutionally granted to constituent units.

Practically, the EPRDF provides political leadership to all of the ethnic regions either through its member organizations or affiliates. This may warrant characterizing Ethiopian federalism as 'national in form' and 'revolutionary democracy in content' by borrowing one of the well known adages of Soviet federalism—'national in form' but 'socialist in content' (Asnake, 2009:66). Because of its failure to make good its promises, the OLF and ONLF, which were initially supportive of ethnic federalism, oppose federal system (Young, 1998:190). Some ethno-nationalist movements consider the present system a mere continuation of 'Abyssinian colonialism' but under the supremacy of the Tigrayan elite instead of their Amhara counterparts (Asafa, 1993:397). The federal system has not reduced the contending political forces interest in controlling the political centre.

Secondly, in spite of the constitutional formal commitment for a multi-party democracy and political pluralism in Ethiopia, there is a tension between the ruling party's promises of democratization and its reticence to live up to these principles. This has been a defining feature of post-1991 Ethiopia (Assefa, 2012:435; Hagmann & Abbink, 2011:582; Asnake, 2009:66). In Ethiopia, 'democracy' and 'democratization' have become promises of an almost spiritual nature that are constantly renewed, but never really fulfilled (Hagmann & Abbink, 2011:591). The ethnic federalism failed to provide a new democratic basis for the Ethiopian State. Instead of multi-party politics, a de facto one party authoritarian

system has actually emerged in Ethiopia. The EPRDF was a post-Marxist-Leninist vanguard party with its institution of governance ideology called 'revolutionary democracy'. Revolutionary democracy is a political concept derived from Lenin, used during his party's struggle for power in the nascent Soviet Union in 1918 (Hagmann & Abbink, 2011:579). They further noted that 'the 'revolutionary democracy' has the trappings of multiparty democracy with parties allowed, elections held and some extent of free press media permitted, but with an unshakably dominant rule of the vanguard party, that assumed power in armed struggle and therefore cannot and will not relinquish it'(ibid: 582). As it draws on the Marxist-Leninist class approach to democracy, it seems that it neither provides guarantees for political autonomy for the regional states nor provides open political space for multiparty politics for peaceful contestation for power.

The link between federalism and democracy has long been theorized by scholars. The question of democracy is quintessentially important in explaining both federalist success and failures (Elazar, 1996:2). Democracy and democratic government is the most fundamental contextual precondition for stabilizing federal system (Aalen, 2006:244). Every federal system requires a democratic political framework to operate genuinely. Almost all of those federations, such as India, Switzerland, Canada and Belgium, which have been reasonably successful, are due to functional democratic system and rule of law. In contrast, almost all of the collapsed communist federations operated under authoritarian systems (Aalen, 2008).

In Ethiopia, the incomplete process of transition resulting from the disengagement of the opposition, shrinkage of the political space and the divergent perspectives with little political accommodation has made the transition to democracy more challenging and protracted (Assefa, 2012:460). Although he cannot see any other formula, Kymlicka is pessimistic about the future of the multi-national federalism in Africa and Ethiopia in particular due to the general absence of two pre-conditions: the de-securitization of ethnic relation and lack of liberal democratic values (2006:52). The absence of these conditions in Africa means that democratic multi-national federalism is more likely to emerge there from the barrel of a gun than it from democratic politics (Turton, 2006:6). It is difficult to sustain a federation for long unless it exhibits some elements of democracy. When democracy is combined with federalism, it takes a peculiar form. Their combination can create multiple centre of decision-making and bring power closer to the people (Watts, 2008:155). In a democracy, power ultimately emanates from the people served through democratic and elected institutions. In contrast, the party dictates institutions of democracy in Ethiopia by using Leninist political heritage of 'democratic centralism' with obvious overlapping

between 'vanguard' EPRDF party and state organ (Hagmann & Abbink, 2011:584-5).

The greatest challenges in Ethiopia today is however the lack of democratic rights and genuine self-government. The Ethiopian federal political system may end up as a victim of its own authoritarianism. Currently, the federal system has been so far operated under an authoritarian system (Asnake, 2009:279; Aalen, 2006:243). The fate of the federal system in Ethiopia is uncertain once after the ruling EPRDF party loses control of power (Clapham, 2009: 191; Aalen, 2006: 261). As evidenced in the communist authoritarian federations, the withering away of the party has led to the withering away of the federation. Like the Soviet and Yugoslavian federations, the Ethiopian federation is maintained by force. It remains to be seen whether a regime change in Ethiopia will lead to disintegration, as it happened in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia or a pre-federation history of territorial and administrative unity, in contrast to the Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia, might prevent disintegration from taking place in the end (Aalen, 2006:255). Given Ethiopia's diversity and complexity and its turbulent history within the Horn of Africa's ever unpredictable political dynamics, it is thus neither useful nor possible to foretell the future of federalism and resultant peace in Ethiopia. If a lot of flexibility and dynamism is not politically undertaken to address these paradoxes, the current peace and relative stability in Ethiopia at the Horn of Africa is fragile.

Thirdly, despite constitutional commitment for broader ethnic autonomy up to secession, ethnic federalism has not realized its promises of ethnic self-administration and autonomy. It seems that Ethiopia has not so far entertained the right to self-determination in accordance with the constitutional promise to its ethnic groups except linguistic and cultural autonomy. Soviet styled federal system is transplanted in Ethiopia. As noted by Towster (1951), although the Soviet federalism in theory provided ethnic self-determination up to secession, in practice never allowed autonomy beyond culture and language (cited in Asnake, 2009:66). Theoretically, there are constitutionally entrenched ethnic rights to self-determination up to 'unconditional' right to secession. It is however clear from the experiences that the constituent units and ethnic groups are not allowed to exercise administrative autonomy let alone secession. It seems this is evident in that the Sidama ethnic group in SNNPRS is seriously demanding, sometimes violently, for constitutionally sacred rights for statehood but government has refused to respond as per the constitution.

Although the constitution formalized the right to secession, there are still secessionist armed insurgencies by the ONLF and the OLF in Ethiopia. Thus, formalizing secession has neither contributed to the stability of the federation nor prevents the EPRDF regime from

engaging in anti-insurgency activities against such secessionist forces. In many respects, the constitutional promises are far from realization and failed to provide a new democratic basis for the Ethiopian State. Like the practice of the Soviet Union, the decision of granting autonomy or statehood and even self-governance at sub-regional levels for ethnic groups solely rests upon the 'vanguard' EPRDF party at national level on the basis of political expediency (Aalen, 2008). Thus, there are full of inconsistency and anomalism in granting the right to self-administration for ethnic groups. For instance, the very tiny minority Harari were accorded regional status as core 'nation', while the Sidama whose population more than three million were degraded from regional status to zonal level after unilateral merger of interim period's five regional units in the areas comprising today's Southern Regional State.

Against the universal constitutional promise for ethnic groups of all size, the federal system overemphasized the rights of ethno-nationalist groups to self-determination. Practically, this has brought concerns regarding the rights of smaller ethnic groups who have not yet allowed establishing separate self-rule at regional or sub-regional levels. The issue here is about deciding whether Ethiopia is a federation that has space for both dominant ethno-nationalist groups and smaller ethnic groups, who are either subsumed under ethnic regions or conglomerated within the multiethnic regions. The EPRDF is instrumentally using the right to self-determination for political mobilization rather than genuinely empowering ethnic groups as per the promise of the constitution. Due to this instrumental approach to ethnicity, ethnic groups are still far from exercising the right to self-determination. But, the right to self-determination is producing localized ethnic identity and autonomy conflicts due to assertion of ethnic identity to exercise ethnic autonomy in accordance with the constitutional promise.

Controversies on the Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia

Two contending perspectives have been put forward on the use of ethnic-based federal system to manage ethnic diversity and conflicts. Some hold the view that ethnic federal system helps to democratically manage ethnic diversity and conflicts. While others claim that ethnic federalism leads to the exacerbated levels of ethnic tensions and conflicts instead of pacifying inter-ethnic relations in deeply divided society. Beyond these theoretical debates on feasibility of federal system, the Ethiopian federal experiences need to emphasis a contextually sensitive approach to the analysis of the enduring debates and controversies on ethnic federal system in accommodating ethnic diversity and conflicts. Cognizant of this, the ongoing controversies and debates

on ethnic federal system in Ethiopia could be discussed from two contending perspectives.

Firstly, Ethiopia has gone further in promoting ethnic diversity. The return to ethnic politics from unitary past was exceptional in Africa and presented by some EPRDF official and scholars as a magic formula that can solve all the political ills of Ethiopia. Scholars advocating the Ethiopian ethnic federal system contend that it would help to end ethno-national conflicts and accommodate ethnic diversity (Salih & Markakis, 1998; Alemseged, 2004; Mengisteab, 1997; Young, 1998). In this regard, Meles Zenawi, the late premier of Ethiopia from 1991-2012 and the leader of the EPRDF noted that:

From a purely legal point of view, what we were trying to do was to stop the war, and start the process of peaceful competition [...]. The key cause of the war all over the country was the issue of nationalities. Any solution that did not address them did not address the issue of peace and war [...]. People were fighting for the right to use their language, to use their culture, to administer themselves. So without guaranteeing these rights it was not possible to stop the war, or prevent another one (cited in Vaughan, 2003:36-7).

Advocates of ethnic federal system share the above argument of Melese Zenawi. For instance, using a normative phrase, Kidane Mengisteab has described ethnic federal system as 'Ethiopia's novel ethnic policy' (1999:22). However, as most of these scholarly studies were conducted within the first decade after the adoption of the federal system in 1995, it was too early to make sound evidence based judgments. Thus, advocating ethnic federal system by focusing only on the design of the system as appropriate and legitimate policy measure to accommodate diversity and managing ethnic conflicts could not help much in our understanding of federalism. When we look back on two decades long federal experimentation beyond the issue of design, the key question that arises is to what extent the federal system has attained its goals of building sustainable peace and legal foundation for building democracy. Scholarly debates regarding the key political transformations and achievements that have taken place in the past two decades have still remained extremely polarized and controversial.

Secondly, as oppose to above optimistic views, ethnic federalism attracted criticism from many scholars and political parties. The reliance of federal system on ethnicity and formalizing unconditional right to secession are the key factors that elicit criticism against the federal system. This return to ethnic politics was exceptional in Africa as most if not all post-colonial African states rejected such an

approach as 'tribalist' (Hagmann & Abbink, 2011; Aalen, 2006). The criticism of federal system is by no means limited to those opposed the formalization of both ethnicity and secession in Ethiopia. Critics also points to the deterioration of the critical contextual factors, such as democracy, rule of law, multi-party politics and political pluralism in Ethiopia, from time to time that would help to sustain federal system (Asnake, 2009:268; Aalen, 2008:25; Assefa, 2012:452; Kymlicka, 2006:52). The ethnic federalism has neither realized its own *raison d'état* nor emerged as a credible instrument of pacifying ethnic conflicts.

The existence of Soviet styled vanguard party system under the EPRDF and authoritarian federal system has further increased skepticism on the feasibility of ethnic federal system and increases fear of fragmentation like communist federations. The collapse of former communist federations is not due to nature of federalism but lack of democracy, rule of law and failure of implementing genuine federal system. They were neither genuine nor democratic from the outset (Elazar, 1987). The existence of all-powerful socialist party and authoritarian system undermined federal principles. The critics further contend that the Ethiopian federal system resembles Soviet styled federalism in many respects. Like Soviet practice, Ethiopian federalism is not operating under a democratic framework. The maintenance of Ethiopia's ethnic federalism requires, like the ex-communist federations, the use of force (Aalen 2006: 255). According to critics, the fate of the Ethiopian federal system may not be different from the collapsed communist federations.

If one goes beyond these polarized debates, the key challenge regarding these controversies is that they cannot be proved. It is challenging to know whether it is adopting federalism that has led to increased or decreased level of ethnic conflicts and not other factors. Anyhow, it would be naïve to believe that it is the federal system in itself isolated from all other political processes that has brought more or less ethnic tension and conflicts. The experience demonstrates the fact that adopting federal system is by no means a quick fix to accommodate ethnic diversity and managing ethnic conflict. It is also no more a full explanation for exacerbation of localized identity based conflicts and state disintegration. Empirically, one can observe that ethnic federalism in Ethiopia has both merits and demerits. Its key advantage is that the federal system attempted to address the ethnic demand for cultural preservation and distinctiveness. The federal system granted linguistic and cultural autonomy (Abbink, 2006; Aalen, 2006). On the other hand, federal system has brought its own types of conflicts that led to the proliferation of localized identity and ethnic autonomy conflicts in Ethiopia.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined the historical and normative basis for adopting ethnic-based federalism in Ethiopia. Ethiopia has a unique history within Africa. The Ethiopian state undertook what Christopher Clapham called indigenous state formation akin to European nations through the agency of warfare (2000). As reviewed in the study, the Ethiopian history impels contradictory impulses of glory and vanquish to its own citizens, playing a zero-sum game of politics, lack of compromise, blurred vision of the future regarding larger societal goals, propensity for hegemony, vanity of grandeur, and above all failure to learn from past mistakes and history are all hallmarks of the succeeding generations of Ethiopian elites. The imperial regimes policy of a nation-state building project had brought the *National Questions* by the student movements in Ethiopia. As a solution to *National Question*, the students advocated Marxist-Leninism as their ideological curricula and promoted self-determination up to secession for ethnic groups in the country.

As a radical opposition to the imperial regime, the students played decisive role in erupting the revolution that demised imperial regime in 1974. However, the end result of the revolution was contrary, control of state power by military junta by creeping coup. The *Derge's* effort to restructure the Ethiopian state using Marxist-Leninist ideology was neither fully a positive social transformation that break through the imperial past in terms of the *National Question* nor a successful nation-building project. It was one of the most destructive periods in the country's long-recorded history. The military method for all problems provoked massive resistance from many quarters, which finally sealed the fate of the military regime itself in May 1991 by TPLF, EPLF, OLF and other regionally based groups. Eritrea seceded from Ethiopia. By transforming itself from a uni-ethnic autonomy front to a pan-Ethiopian front, the TPLF controlled the political center of Ethiopia as the EPRDF in 1991.

The TPLF/EPRDF adopted ethnic-based federalism along with the right to self-determination up to secession as legitimate response to *National Question*. Marxist-Leninist ideology deeply influenced the EPRDF's reconstitution of Ethiopia into an ethnic federation. The ethnic groups in Ethiopia were hierarchically categorized as nations, nationalities and people, which are quite similar to Stalin's categorization of ethnic groups in the former Soviet Union. Consequently, the ethnic groups which were considered relatively bigger allowed to form their own regional states and the smaller groups were merged together in multi-ethnic regions. The paradox between the constitutional promises and the EPRDF reticence to live up to these principles has been a defining feature of post-1991 Ethiopia. Despite promise

of federal system and a multi-party democracy, a centralized system with a dominant and vanguard single party system has been prevailing in the country. This paradox has therefore an adverse impact not only on the ability of the ethnic federal system to emerge as a sustainable system but also on building a durable peace in a very fragile Horn of Africa.

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