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# Ethnicity and Nationalism in Ethiopia: Some Recent Reflections

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the post-Mengistu development from the perspective of internal potential conflicts and clashes of nationalisms in Ethiopia after the introduction of the Federal Constitution. It examines the problems of selected Ethiopian regions in regard to the Constitution and their implications for the future. Since the 2005 elections it seems that the question of democracy becomes more problematic and the lack of good governance and democracy thus only helps certain nationalist tendencies to grow and to become more visible. I argue that the- emphasis on ethnicity and ethnic origin may become an obstacle to peace and development in Ethiopia which can seriously affect the region of the Horn as well.*

**Key words:** Ethiopia, ethnicity, conflict, power, society

## Introduction

This study addresses some key challenges of socio-political changes in contemporary Ethiopia, where ethnicity and nationalism have gained great importance. In the era of cultural pluralism, ethnicity and nationalism have been the stuff of politics in diverse nations ranging from former Yugoslavia to India, from Nigeria to China, from Bolivia to South Africa. Its Ethiopian manifestation is one unique aspect that will be the subject of this study. Debates between primordialists and cultural-essentialists have developed through last two decades over the government/diaspora driven discourse on ethnicity in Ethiopia. Since the 1990s, huge amount of empirical data has been published on issues of conflict and ethnicity in various regions of Ethiopia and ethnicity is thus seen as one of the major challenges to peace and integrity of Ethiopia.

The Horn of Africa became during last decades a synonym for conflict and instability both because of international and internal conflicts that affected every country in the region. The multi-ethnic character of most of the states and the lack of democratic means brought several states into long-lasting internal wars as we have seen in Sudan, Somalia or Ethiopia. As rightly pointed out by Mbugua, “all the conflicts in the region are either linked directly, or have an impact on each other. The conflict in Somalia, for instance, has immediate implications for conflict dynamics in Ethiopia, where groups such as the Oromo and the Ogadeni rebels are either emboldened or restricted depending on the balance of forces” (Mbugua 2009, 23-24).

Despite a huge economic potential of at least some of these countries, there has been only a limited development in terms of quality of life, support of private business, creating a middle class, etc. Besides socio-economic, geographical or climate reasons, we may see, especially in Ethiopia, increasing ethno-political factors that seem to be the major

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obstacle to peace and development. While economic specialists are concerned with which economic policy the Ethiopian government will incline to (Mequanent 2008), social scientists warn against discomfiture of democracy (Abbink 2006) that Ethiopian society has felt since at least 2005 elections.

In this paper I discuss both positives and negatives of ethnic-based political system and analyze the role of ethnicity in the political development of Ethiopia. By doing so I use a vast amount of sources, literature and interviews with informants I conducted during my fieldworks in 2008 and 2009. Among the interviewees some of the prominent scholars and opposition leaders can be found. The main argument of this study is that ethnicity in Ethiopia with its politicized contents has been for years a major barrier to socio-economic and political development since a majority of decision-making processes has been held through “ethnic” lenses. This causes an atmosphere where people, instead of searching for their own individual life-strategies are divided and treated according to their ethnic origin as a primordial entity allowing or restricting access to politics, business or education.

### **Overview of the Topic**

In last two decades several African multi-ethnic countries have developed different strategies how to deal with ethnic diversity and equal rights of all minorities. These steps were undertaken in order to prevent other conflicts to spread and to create functional societies where all people have equal opportunities to gain education, job and justice. All African states have had to reconsider ethnic identity as it has developed through pre-colonial, colonial into post-colonial period. Colonial states in Africa left a legacy which newly created governments had to rebuild but in most cases it was done unsuccessfully as in many countries several sections of population were favored while other marginalized. Among “legitimate” instruments of political struggle ethnic cleansing, genocide, discrimination, and economic marginalization could be counted (Nnoli 1998, 24).

In some cases, ethnic policy became a central and successful agenda of policy makers. Among these we may include South Africa and Namibia. In several other multi-ethnic countries, regional diversities, economic development and lack of good governance, on the other hand, contributed to prevailing tensions and hostilities which are difficult to overcome without a prospective political mechanisms and, as in the case of Sudan, without help of an international community (Prunier 2007, Flint and de Waal 2008, Petterson 2003). Some conflicts in the recent times have proved to be hard to settle without international intervention as those in Sierra Leone and Liberia (Zack-Williams 2008).

The problem of modern African states is also the problem of identities because such identities as “Ivoirien’ or “Congolais” (and many others) were created during colonialism or the period of decolonization, and then transformed or politically (ab)used in internal struggles over resources and power in respected countries (Sciortino 2008, 82-83). In Congo, Mobutu under his philosophy of *authenticité* produced officially implemented policy of Zairianization which would replace and eliminate the former European colonial influence in day-to-day-life as well as in administration and government. His proclamations were outshined by brutality of his regime, which not only created a unified nation, but contributed to hostilities and secessionist tendencies in Eastern and Central parts of Congo (Ndaywel è

Nziem 1998). Laurent Kabila's short-lived rule, usually referred to as 'Mobutuism without Mobutu', showed similar policies. Moreover, during Kabila's reign the threat of what Bokamba calls "Kiswahilization of key central government positions" (Bokamba 2008, 230) took place in Congo as Kabila's anti-Mobutu forces were composed of speakers of Kiswahili from Eastern Congo. Fragile ethno-linguistic balance, distorted by decades of Mobutu regime as well as by Rwandan invasion into the country's interior, seemed to be deteriorating until 2001 when Joseph Kabila was elected president of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Categories as "Congolais" or "Zairoi" thus remained concepts of political elites that could not be implemented due to non-existence of truly democratic regime, although some authors claim both ethnic, regional and national identities co-exist in contemporary Congo and do not contradict themselves (Biaya 2001, 53). The road to fully democratic and ethno-linguistically balanced Congo will be long and hard as it deserves equal rights to all minorities and regions including equal redistribution of wealth from Congo's rich natural resources.

In terms of ethnic federalism, it is better to compare Ethiopia with Nigeria, since the Nigerian federation is Africa's largest and longest experiment in the use of federal institutions to manage cultural-historical pluralism and conflict (Suberu 2006, 65). In Nigeria, we may find similar causes of conflict including ethnicity and socio-economic marginalization, as in Ethiopia. Bolanle Akande Adetoun, for instance, marked the major conflict areas in the Niger-Delta as follows: 1) inter- and intra-ethnic/community conflict over land ownership; 2) development projects promoting inter-group conflict and rivalry; 3) conflicts when projects do not satisfy the felt needs of the communities; 4) non-adequate compensations for oil spills; 5) the oil companies quote high amounts for the cost of projects that do not match what is seen on the ground; 6) contractors collecting money but not executing the projects; 7) persistent and increasing demands for socio-economic development by host communities from the oil companies; 8) youths of some communities are pitched against their elders; 9) rival youth groups within a community seek to be recognized as authentic representatives of their people and claim diverse benefits from oil companies (Adetoun 2005, 50-51). Such a socio-economic marginalization can fit well into the case of Oromia which we discuss in this text. Ethiopia's main export commodity, coffee, is claimed by some as the main product of Oromia from which the Oromo people have no adequate profit (Benti 2009).

While the political situation in the Niger Delta is influenced by socio-economic and generational factors, as mentioned above, conditions in the North and South-West of Nigeria show ethno-regional causes that have developed into conflict situations since the colonial times (Mustapha 1998). The "dominant ethnic strategy" concept can be applied to Nigeria as well as the three majority nationalities, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba emerged as a consequence of colonial politics. Exclusion, competition and authoritarianism were the main tendencies that can be attributed to these emergent ethnic identities. The Biafra war in 1967-1970 was in this sense a direct product of colonial period to which the post-colonial atmosphere in Nigeria was not prepared properly as regional inequalities, economic decay and ethno-religious intolerance forced rationality out of political sphere. These might be, of course, a simplistic view on character of ethnicity and ethnic conflict in Nigeria. As suggested by Thomas Imobighe (2003, 22), most conflicts "that are generally referred to as ethnic conflicts in Nigeria have little or nothing to do with ethnicity. In other words, they do not arise simply from the fact that parties belong to different ethnic groups." Mustapha (2004) claims ethnic

sectarianism a real threat to democracy and integrity of Nigeria but he warns against simplistic approaches to the problems of ethnicity and politics. First, it is needed to differentiate inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts, as already emphasized by Adeltoun.

Ethnic nationalism in multi-ethnic African countries have been accompanied by a rise of political activism seeking to re-write the history of the people and the country in order to legitimize political actions. Politically active Oromo created a useful political culture out of shared feelings of ethnicity which has required, as discussed by Baxter (1994, 177), the reconstruction of a powerful, but nevertheless egalitarian and democratic, past which is required to be the opposite of, and therefore morally superior to, that of the Amhara. It has to provide both a charter for the present and a program for the future.

As rightly underpinned by Nnoli (1998, 25), if the African state is central to “the dynamics of ethnicity in Africa, ethnic conflict prevention and termination must address the issue of its reconstitution and transformation. This point has not been fully and widely recognized by policy makers. They still act as if cultural differences among ethnic groups are the central factors in ethnic conflict.” Furthermore, ethnic tensions in many African countries are usually solved through formation of federal states or through autonomy where ethnic groups can be self-governed but as reminded by Will Kymlicka (2004, 66), ethnic conflicts “are likely to take the form of struggles for a share of state power at the central level, rather than ethnonationalist struggles for self-government and autonomy at a regional level.” In this sense, formation of the so-called “ethnic federation” does not guarantee peace and prosperity since it depends on broader political and socio-economic aspects including equal opportunities in education, jobs, incomes, resources, infrastructure, etc.

### **Ethnicity and Nationalism in Contemporary Ethiopia**

Ethnicity is usually considered as a problem as modern history of sub-Saharan Africa is concerned. The reasons, according to Chabal and Daloz (1999, 56), are the following: 1) it is viewed as an inconvenient leftover from a previous ‘traditional’ age and a hindrance to modernization; 2) or as a divisive political weapon used by unscrupulous political operators. The two authors, in my opinion, rightly point at the fact that such an interpretation of the term itself is rather “mechanistic” while it is needed to consider ethnicity as a “dynamic, multi-faceted and interactive cluster of changeable self-validated attributes of individual-cum-collective identities” (Chabal and Daloz 1999, 56). Tegegne Teka adds pointing at Ethiopia that the urban population does not welcome ethnic-based policy and that it is not clear “how the rural population feels and the extent to which it endorses ethnic federalism” (Teka 1998, 117).

The modern Ethiopian history has always been seen through a perspective of ethnicity since the rule of the government was centered around the Amhara ethnic group while the Oromo formed the largest opposition. In this sense, Donald Levine (1974) could write about the process of “Amhara thesis”, “Oromo anti-thesis” and “Ethiopian synthesis”. Recently, there have been attempts to redefine this interpretation of Ethiopian history, as done, for instance by Merera Gudina who talks about three perspectives: colonial, nation-building and national oppression (Merera 2006).

In sub-Saharan Africa, the concept of self-determination of nations evolved after the World War II when the wind of change began to influence colonial policies and educated elites in Africa called for independence. Especially in multi-ethnic societies it was almost impossible to establish a truly democratic regime which would respect rights of all minorities since it was not unusual that educated political elites were recruited from one ethnic group while others had been prevented from gaining access to education and sources. The concept of self-determination has had many levels depending on local socio-economic, ethnic and historical traditions.

The problem of political tensions in contemporary Ethiopia, which I consider the main obstacle to peace and development since unequal distribution of power and resources is widely documented, lies also in a lack of coherence of opposition parties. Wondwosen Teshome, in his analysis of opposition parties in Africa, presented nine weaknesses of opposition parties in Africa. These are the following: fragmentation; "personalistic" parties; failure to produce alternative policy; lack of long history and experience; lack of mass base; limited women membership; weak financial position; ethnicity, and uncoordinated election boycotts. Of these nine weaknesses, at least three can be applied to the Ethiopian case. These are ethnicity, fragmentation and uncoordinated election boycotts. Ethnicity has been of the main points of clashes between the ruling EPRDF party and some opposition parties like CUD (Coalition for Unity) or UEDF (United Ethiopian Democratic Forces) who strongly opposed using ethnicity for political gain (Wondwosen 2009).

The main ethno-political opposition force, the Oromo opposition parties, seem to be rather disunited and fragmented than being able to present a clearly defined political alternative. Lack of alternatives and lack of mutual communication between opposition parties in Ethiopia is one of crucial aspects of failing democracy since the government has no strong challenge (Gudina 2009, personal communication; Berhanu 2009, personal communication). The Oromo nationalism has its roots in the 19th century political development on the Ethiopian highlands but as a political force we can place its origin into the middle of the 20th century. During the reign of Haile Selassie many intellectuals and political activists protested against non-democratic character of the Ethiopian state (Balsvik 2005). Group consciousness among the Oromo, which emerged during the 20th century, have not produced solidarity or a successful ethno-nationalist movement that would gather all Oromos under one shelter. In fact, different existing Oromo groups and political parties have never been successful to effectively mobilize Oromos from various Ethiopian regions.

As added by Paulos Chanie, "the history of the Oromo elite is the history of discord and fracture which has adversely affected Oromo solidarity" (Chanie 1998, 104). This may well correspond to Jack David Eller's observation on ethnicity who states that the "strength and significance of ethnicity vary between individuals and groups as well as over time for any particular individual or group" (Eller 1999, 9). In the process of the formation of the Oromo nationalism, educated elite of the diaspora played a crucial role. Most Oromo in exile have been concerned, with varying degrees of passion and commitment, to establish Oromo autonomy. There have been, of course, many differences in terms of its extent and form, but general agreement has been to see the Oromo language and Oromo customs given equal status with Northerners, as the Amhara-Tigrayan population has used to be called. A certain part of Oromo nationalists claimed that "cultural autonomy is not possible without political

autonomy, that is, the creation of an independent state of Oromia, which has been the declared goal of the Oromo Liberation Front” (Baxter 1994, 170-171).

Ethnicity as a mobilizing factor stood at the beginning of the Federal Constitution and it continues to be a mobilizing factor at every political level: federal, regional, zonal, *wereda* and *kebele*. There are many examples of local conflicts caused by conceptualized ethnicity. At the beginning of 2009, there has been a referendum in Yem Special District of Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples’ Region (SNNPR) which was claimed by voters to be manipulated as their ballots had been confiscated, non-voters were made to vote, and some *kebeles* were wrongly included into the referendum. This was held to vote under which region five of controversial *kebeles* should be included, whether to Oromia or SNNPR (Seven Days Update 2009, 5).

Similar cases have been documented from the borders between Oromia and Somali region. There, the clan areas exist since Somali society relies on mobility and flexibility due to prevailing pastoralism. By establishing decentralized administration including local *kebeles*, violent conflicts tend to occur frequently on borders of these *kebeles* driven by the motive of territorial control. In past years, numerous districts and *kebeles* along the Somali-Oromia-Afar regions borders have been created while Somalis accused their regional administration of betraying Somali interests by “illegally transferring” land to Oromia state (Hagmann and Khalif 2007, 30). These and many other events claimed to be caused by the government manipulations contribute to create an atmosphere of tensions at local as well as macro-regional level.

In terms of replacing political strategies and as compared to the socialist Ethiopia, civic nationalism has been replaced by ethnic nationalism as a supreme goal of the current government. Tensions between citizenship and ethnicity in Ethiopia are also augmented by ethnic differentiation where there exist three categories of groups: nations, nationalities and peoples. Ethnic hierarchies can be seen at various levels in Ethiopia, not only among these categories but also between indigenes vs. settlers as is the case of Gambella or Amhara regions (Habtu 2004, Tafesse 2007).

But when we take into account Ekeh’s definition of democracy for whom it is a “political expression of a relationship between the individual, as a citizen, and the state” (Ekeh 2004, 36), we can see somewhat contradiction in the case of Ethiopia where group rights seem to outshine the individual rights. That is why democracy is for some authors an “empty rhetoric” (Merera 2007, 146) while for others Ethiopia is a “relatively less democratic country” (Assefa 2006, 159). Unequal distribution of power and wealth among regions promotes a climate of uncertainty and hostility and as demonstrated on the example of Oromia, where the government established OPDO’s are considered as enemies, the top-down strategy of the Ethiopian democratization and decentralization process tend to fail as it does not meet the demands of the population in the regions. Hegemonic aspirations of the so-called Tigrayan clique has obstructed every genuine step forward real decentralization and democratization (Merera 2007).

## **Ethnicity and History of Ethiopia**

One of the key terms I use in the text is ethnicity. Even though there is no generally accepted definition of ethnicity which might be used as a benchmark, we have at least two historically acknowledged approaches how to study ethnicity. The first, the so-called *Primordialist* model counts with ethnic boundary markers – religion, dress, language or other symbols – which distinguish one ethnic group from the other. The second, the so-called *Constructionist* or *Instrumentalist* model suggests that although ethnic groups maintain boundaries such as language to mark their identity, people may modify and shift their language and ethnic identity in different types of social interaction (Scupin and DeCorse 2004, 579-580). The latter was an important step because it moved ethnicity from culture or changed approach to ethnicity from *static* to *interactional*. The most important work in this sense was Frederick Barth's *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), although it might be argued that boundaries may not serve as means of division but also as “places” where people and groups meet.

In this text, I argue that the contemporary political situation have created rather “static” ethnic groups regarded as unchangeable entities where individual shifting of identities is not pre-supposed and this concept of ethnic policy tends to be an obstacle to peace and thus to prospective development because it creates an atmosphere of hostilities and tensions both on the micro-political and macro-political levels. Ethnicity in contemporary Ethiopia creates an impression as it is something given, something with which a man is born and we can see these perceptions on both sides of the battlefield, the government as well as the opposition, mainly the Oromo diaspora organizations which fully adopted the governments' perspective. Such views probably do not admit that no ethnic group treat all aspects of its culture or history as markers of its identity but rather regard ethnic groups as *monolithic* or as mentioned above, *static* entities with their own political representation that follow wishes and demands of their people.

In Ethiopia, the emergence of ethnic consciousness and ethnic mobilization thus have not occurred due to inherent primordial sentiments but rather due to social, political, and economic reasons. Primordial reasons, such as language, common descent, ancestral linkage, have been important especially for educated elites in the diaspora or in Ethiopia (Balcha 2008, 15). Political aspects of ethnic mobilization have been characteristic for Ethiopia's modern history already since the Haile Selassie regime and have been only reinforced since 1991 when the Tigrayan dominated government and the Tigrayan dominant ethnic strategy have been formed. Educated elites among the non-Semitic groups developed a perspective of colonization and subjugation which helped to intensify the struggle for self-determination and which was directed to unification of the respective group. Such tendencies had their origin in the period of the Haile Selassie autocratic rule and coincide with the rise of Eritrean struggle for independence which served for other movements as a signal for mobilizing the people. Socio-economic factors and political resistance against the injustice coming from the centre to periphery played a remarkable role for further ethnic categorization and classification in Ethiopia.

As written by Donald Donham (2002, 12), such a categorization based on core-periphery structure did not have ethnic but rather regional connotations as the category 'Amhara' denoted a particular position at the centre of this structure and its relation to

Orthodox Christianity and Amharic language. Territorial principle of ethnicity remains actual in Ethiopia as we may see on examples of latent or violent conflicts along ethnic lines.

With the fall of Haile Selassie in 1974, the time for a new order had come under the shelter of Marxism as an officially recognized doctrine of the Derg regime. At the time of revolution it seemed that the new socialist rule would be a perfect model for those calling for self-determination and recognition of ethnic plurality and equality of all people in Ethiopia. While in many other African countries the sense of nationhood had been created as a result of the struggle against colonialism, in Ethiopia the story was different due to specific reasons I already suggested above.

Nationhood in sub-Saharan Africa, or better to say, its creation had been connected with proving or disproving of wishes of the ruling individuals and groups (Skalník 2008, 219). As pointed out by Skalník (2008), cultural symbols, symbolism of power or a status of a national hero had been aspects around which many African states have been developed in the post-colonial period. In Ethiopia, the situation was remarkably different due to Ethiopia's independence and resistance to colonialism but still we consider the Emperor, Orthodox Christianity and Amharic language as symbols of power which had both religious and political aspects. The Ethiopian "nation" was thus created through the process of baptism and Amharization, symbols of civilized people, in opposition to uncivilized and pagan ethnic groups in rural, non-Amhara, areas. Differentiation along these symbols of "modernity" established a multi-level society in Ethiopia with the Amhara being simply "ahead", followed by Oromo, Gurage, and with peripheral societies in the lowlands at the bottom (Donham 1999, 128-129).

The question thus remained the same: how to reach the nationhood while respecting ethnic diversities and the right to self-determination? Mengistu Haile Mariam, since 1977 the one and only leader of socialist Ethiopia, was himself an illustrative example of ambivalences of ethnic and national identity. As discussed by Donham, Mengistu's origin could be placed into a poor, half non-Amhara background, which then had to help him to legitimize power as the one who is capable to resolve tensions between ethnicity and nationalism or in "some way to preserve the nation while transforming ethnic hierarchies" (Donham 1999, 130). Failure of Mengistu's regime in ethnic, social and economic policy became evident when it soon turned into what Markakis and Ayele (2006, 177) claimed to as "an unprincipled, violently oppressive military dictatorship."

Despite visible failures the government managed to overcome centuries-long diversification of the state and privileged/subjugated people dichotomy at least through alphabetization campaign which also promoted so far unrecognized big languages including Oromo, Wolaita, Somali, or Tigrigna. However, these attempts were filled by many technical problems including lack of skilled instructors, materials and moreover, by conceptual problems as learners were not always convinced of "the value of acquiring literacy in these languages when Amharic remained so essential to careers and advancement within the country" (Appleyard and Orwin 2008, 176). The position of Amharic language, by some considered a tool of imperial Ethiopia to subjugate its people, was only strengthened as the vast majority of guide books, manuals and other publications was written in it, not mentioning its importance for career-building in state structures, business, government, etc.

It was during the 1980s that the sense of ethnic solidarity had been gradually cultivated as many members of various struggling movements were imprisoned or simply disappeared. When people face real or imagined threats ethnic identities and solidarities become essential and mobilizing and combined with government's agricultural failures and discrimination of "non-loyal" regions, the 1980s were filled by accented, though less coordinated, efforts to overthrow the regime and to establish a true democracy respecting rights of minorities and promoting various different cultures and languages no matter of which origin.

### **Failed Road to Democracy**

While the Emperor regime was based on clearly defined ethno-linguistic supremacy of the Amhara and Amharic language, the socialist Derg regime declared the right to self-determination of nations leading to increasing rights of minorities including standardization of several major languages. The government of Mengistu Haile Mariam, however, did not bring any significant change in terms of political structure and state power which still belonged to Amhara ethnic group and despite the proclamation of alphabetization policy which was meant to support the status of some big languages, the role of Amharic was only strengthened since all major books and manuals were written in this language (Bulcha 1997). Multi-ethnic and multi-lingual character of the Ethiopian society was rather denied, or, as rightly underpinned by Abadir Mohamed (2008, 59), the socialist government "had to pretend that Ethiopia was a Nation-State blind to the diversity inherent in the ethnic, linguistic and cultural communities inhabiting the country." Civil war which forced Mengistu to flee into Zimbabwean exile was conducted not only as a struggle against dictatorship but also as a struggle against famine since the socialist government used famine as a political tool in order to punish 'rebellious' provinces.

In this sense, the fall of Mengistu regime brought a common sense of unification which many people hoped would lead to a long awaited democracy. After the Transitional period when the Charter of Ethiopia was drafted as a supreme law and after the independence of Eritrea, there were no signals of potential threats although already the Transitional period had been filled by mutual disagreements between the government and especially the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) struggling not only against Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF) but also against the government-installed Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO) (Pausewang et al. 2001, 29-30).

It has to be stated at the beginning that already the transitional process ensured the continuing trend of diversification rather than unification of Ethiopian ethnic groups and political parties. TPLF is usually blamed for allowing fragmentation of politics within which multi-ethnic political groups were marginalized while ethnic movements encouraged or mobilized. Merera Gudina (2003, 87-88) offers three reasons from which two seem to be crucial for the post-Mengistu development. First, the multi-ethnic movements led mostly by the Amhara elites who refused to accept Eritrea's independence had to be marginalized. Second, the easiest way to maintain a minority hegemony is to use a divide-and-rule policy. Contradictions between OLF and the ruling TPLF led to political-military clashes and contributed to label OLF as a terrorist group which was then re-accented especially after 11 September 2001 when Ethiopia joined the U.S. in the 'war on terror.' (de Waal and Abdel

Salam 2004). Contrariwise, Asafa Jalata (1993, p. 190) states that OLF demonstrated its refusal of a conventional war with the TPLF/EPDRF forces by withdrawing from some cities in February 1992. Transitional period with its conflict between TPLF and OLF showed from its beginning that such a broad coalition of parties would be impossible to accommodate. Serious tension were created, according to Merera Gudina (2007, 132), by incongruous ambitions of quarreling organizations as TPLF wanted to reestablish Ethiopia around the centrality of the Tigrayan elite while OLF sought to share power comparable to the size of Oromo people.

The Federal Constitution divided Ethiopia into 11 states of which none can be considered as fully homogenous since ethnic diversity exists, due to historical and migratory reasons, in every region of Ethiopia. The Federal Constitution created federal states of whom there are seven more or less homogenous, or not so heterogeneous to say exactly – Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somalia, Gambella, Harari – and two – Beni Shangul/Gumuz and Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples’ Region (SNNPR) – extremely heterogeneous. The big cities - Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa – gained special statuses since in these cases it is difficult to talk in ethnic terms. Article 39 claims that every state has the right to choose its own official language as the means of communication and education at schools. The Amhara region decided for Amharic, the Somali region for Somali language, and the Oromo region for Oromo. The Afar region and the SNNPR chose Amharic which was a rational step since in the latter there exists no clear majority that could claim its language as superior.

Despite regularly organized elections in 1995 and 2000, it was the year 2005 that put Ethiopia into a completely different light and uncovered huge problems of Ethiopia’s failed democratization process. Parliamentary elections of 2005 were strongly anticipated by international community, donors and foreign observers since Ethiopia not only became the major partner of the U.S. government in the ‘war on terror’ in this part of Africa, but internal political complications in Ethiopia would bring further instability to the whole area. The 2005 elections were the first in Ethiopia’s history that could be regarded as truly multi-party. While international community and political opposition wished to transform a rather oppressive regime into democratic government, the Meles Zenawi government proved little understanding for these desires. Shortly before the elections, steps towards free campaign were undertaken as important debates were held on state television or generally in the media. Some people doubted whether this was a genuine government policy or rather a pragmatic gesture towards foreign donors stressing the importance of democratic elections (Abbink 2006).

The question is whether multi-party elections can bring peace and development in Africa or if peace and development is necessarily connected only to democratically elected government. The ruling party, EPDRF, was seriously shocked by the result of the elections as well as the extent of public unrest stemming from election manipulations and authoritarian rule of Melese Zenawi. As analyzed by Merera Gudina (2008, 117-118), the ruling party developed its policy from criticism of Western type of liberal democracy which they see as the democracy of rent seekers and anti-development while revolutionary democracy better serves to economic development. At this opportunity, a concrete reminiscence comes to my mind. When talking to a man in Addis Ababa I was told by him that current political system in Ethiopia can be described as a “democracy without bread” evoking rather the Derg regime.

Though it was meant as a bitter joke, when analyzing this statement we can abstract several crucial points in regard to current political situation in Ethiopia.

First, the word “democracy” was in this case meant as a joke rather than a seriously meant note. Many studies and many observers have discussed the failure of democracy and conflict generation in Ethiopia since the establishment of the new Ethiopian constitution in 1995 (Abbink 2006). The most accepted reason of conflict in Ethiopia is summed up by Tafesse Olika (2003, 78-79) who states that conflicts in Ethiopia have “their causes in violent competition over resources among the power elite due to their differential access to state power and the scarce economic resources.”

Second, the failure of contemporary Ethiopian regime to face an economic crisis and to manage properly an equal distribution of wealth and food into marginalized regions forces many people to migrate into urban areas where they seek financial help. Political instabilities have been main features of African food and development crises in many cases and the relation between political instability and economic growth in Africa is widely discussed elsewhere (Tekolla 1997). As for Ethiopia, economic problems are related to central government as suggested by Edmond Keller who states that revenues “collected at the center are shared with regional states, but most of these resources are used to cover the salaries of state, zonal, *wereda*, and local officials, and other recurrent expenses. Most states, because of the lack of resources, are not able to engage in new capital projects. Moreover, there is in most cases a severe lack of skilled administrative capacity below the national and state levels, and this too serves as a drag on democracy and development” (Keller 2005, 129).

To strengthen its power in administratively rather underdeveloped state, the EPRDF government “fought steadily against expressions of concerted action in civil society, in the sense that it wanted to control all the unions with its own cadres”, as discussed by Balsvik (2007, 118). Appointment of civil servants and public officials based on ethnic origin and party affiliation is widely documented and it can be considered another obstacle to Ethiopia’s development as the highly skilled persons are prevented from gaining adequate jobs while incompetent and inexperienced personnel occupy the offices (Aalen 2002, 96).

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen, ethnicity itself cannot be regarded as a sole factor of conflict in Ethiopia but works as a long-lasting, historically rooted divisive aspect of the Ethiopian society that the current constitution helped to stress instead of lessen. Or, as suggested by Abbink (2006, 402), a “prescriptive policy of ethnic identity on the micro-political level [...] tends to lead people to conceptualize local conflict in essentialist terms, rooting it in the presumed ethno-linguistic differences”.

Political and economic development in Ethiopia in recent years has not had helped people to increase their standard of live and, moreover, the Horn of Africa in general is still being perceived as a synonym for crisis, instability, failure of democracy, and refugee problems (Asres 2007). Ethno-linguistically balanced policy might be a good opportunity to solve historical and socio-economic problems in states previously affected by domination of

one group over the rest of the population (South Africa would be the best example) but it has to be done together with development of civil society, growth of a middle class, support of educated elites, equal share of power and wealth and generally good governance which would promote civil society with respect to all minorities and this process seem to be restricted as some scholars warn (Cheru 2009).

Another problem Ethiopia's current political trends are based on is the constitution with its many contradictions or ambiguities. These all are related to ethnicity and ethnic-based policy of the state. The first one regards the right of self-government for every ethnic group. In Ethiopia, 80 ethnic groups reside but only nine self-government regions exist, and it is not clear from the constitution, on which principle these federal states have been created. Then there is the polarity between ethnic and civil society as I discussed earlier. The Ethiopian political system is based on the fact that all "sovereign power resides in the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples" (The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 1995, 79) but this would mean that individuals are not recognized without their ethnic origin which, as generally less accented but rightly pointed out by some, may contradict with the fundamentals of human rights provisions of the same constitution declaring inviolable and inalienable human rights and freedoms. Politicized ethnicity can be, as I argued in this paper, one of the major obstacles to peace and development as it is taken as a primordial entity. Not only the government, but the diaspora as well promote such a discourse which in turn contributes to failed social and political dialogue.

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