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Effects of Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia. Holding Together or Splitting Apart?

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1. Introduction

Regarding minority rights and ethnic self-determination, Ethiopia appears to have adopted a highly progressive political system. After revolutionary groups overthrew the oppressive regime of the military *Derg* in 1991, the multiethnic party EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) introduced a system of ethnically based federalism. This means that distinct territories dispose over certain autonomy and represent ethnic communities politically at the state level. However, the multi-ethnic state rhetoric has provoked controversies because politics by the EPRDF have appeared to be biased towards the ethnic group of *Tigray*, Ethiopia's third largest ethnic group (Habtu, 2004: 97). In fact, the EPRDF is dominated by former members of the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) since most of the revolutionary fighters belonged to the *Tigray* and because more radical parties from other ethnical groups have withdrawn. It was in the interest of *Tigray* people to provide ethnic groups with more autonomy because as a relative cultural minority they were affected by the policies of previous regimes that were in favor of the Amharic culture and ignored or prohibited the expression of other ethnic and linguistic communities. Their resistance was further grounded in the rejection of a central state which did not respond to local needs. Therefore, the new political leadership introduced a system which promoted cultural diversity and multiethnic political participation by devolving political power to local communities. The principles of ethnic self-determination and decentralization were constitutionally adopted to attain these goals. This strategy may have been inevitable to ensure the survival of the Ethiopian state, because pressure exerted by several ethnic groups on the government and claims for secession menaced to disintegrate Ethiopia. The new leaders, aware of Ethiopia's fragile

unity, aimed thus at integrating major ethnic groups by providing the option for secession within the federation in order to keep the state intact. However, ethnic conflict has persisted and is eroding the legitimacy of the central government (Abbink 2006: 390). The continuous conflict indicates that ethnic federalism has not alleviated tensions as envisaged by the EPRDF. It is therefore important to evaluate what factors have unifying and what factors have separating influences on Ethiopia's multi-ethnic society in order to estimate whether the current political form is reducing or exacerbating potential for ethnic conflict. It is the aim of this paper to juxtapose the benefits and the dangers of ethnic federalism as it is currently practiced in Ethiopia. The factors that endanger the current system simultaneously suggest under what conditions the concept of ethnic federalism might succeed in the Ethiopian context.

2. Factors Holding Ethiopia Together

2.1 Failed Experiences of Nation-Building and Secession

Ethiopia is a unique country because it is the only African state that has never been entirely colonized. It has been governed by several emperors until the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, followed by the dictatorship of Haile Mengistu and the military *Derg*. These authoritarian regimes applied politics of nation-building and tried to unite Ethiopians by enforcing Amharic culture on all citizens. However, the ignorance of Ethiopia's cultural diversity provoked resistance against the ruling elites. There are more than 80 different ethnic groups in Ethiopia, some of which have articulated claims for autonomy and secession. However, the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea from 1998-2000 demonstrated that secession is not a panacea for ethnic disputes. Ethiopia's history has

shown that neither cultural suppression nor secession has proven to be a solution to ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. This is why a voluntary union of diverse regions is promising to reduce ethnic conflicts and stabilize the region. Theoretically, ethnic federalism endorses the principle of a voluntary union and it is therefore a positive factor for the current system.

2.2 Ideological Commitment

In addition, the regime change of 1991 was not a military coup, but a revolution from within the country. Hence, ethnic federalism was installed voluntarily after the overthrow of a dictatorship instead of being a resolution from above (Teferi, 2004: 612). The commitment to the regime change was high since TPLF members had invested many years of rebellion against the dictatorship of Mengistu. Most of the revolutionary leaders were educated and committed to break the hierarchical system in order to create a more equitable society. The new government's agenda decidedly took this course, as the Constitution of 1995 demonstrates. Article 39.1 even allows for secession within the federation. Even though article 39.1 is one of the most disputed parts in the Constitution, it demonstrates the commitment of the government to change the nation-building policies of its predecessors. According to Daniel Weinstock, "social unity (...) has to do with the continuing desire on the part of the population to continue living under the same political institutions" (Weinstock, 1999: 289). Thus, the political will of the leading party, the voluntary adoption of power devolution and the installation of ethnic federalism from below are factors that contribute to the willingness of different nationalities to remain within the federation. The apparent commitment of the leadership to a change in power

relations and to the principles of ethnic federalism is a condition that positively affects the outcome of the new system.

2.3 Adoption of an Alternative Form of Democracy

The regime change in Ethiopia occurred in the context of democratization of several African and Eastern European states after the end of the Cold War. In this period, numerous officially democratized countries in Africa had proven to be inefficient in developing a truly democratic system. One of the major explanations for the failure of democracy, which is explained in more detail by Peter Ekeh, is the decline of trust in the state as a governing organ because of experiences of exploitation by the governing elites during colonialism (Ekeh 2004). As a consequence of the lack of institutional trust, state organs are still widely perceived as exploitative mechanisms. Even though Ethiopia, in contrast to other African states, had been subject to nation-building projects of several Amharic-speaking elitist groups prior to the period of colonialism, it had not experienced such a radical re-organization of power structures as after 1991 (Gudina 2006: 119). Further difficulties emerged because Western democratic models could not be directly translated into the contexts of African societies. Thomas-Woolley and Keller compared the adoption of federalism in the United States with the adoption of federalism in African states. They found similarities between both contexts because there were disagreements over the need of a union and over the concrete arrangements that would represent the majority while protecting minority interests. In both cases there was suspicion that other groups in society could gain too much power (1994: 416). However, Thomas-Woolley and Keller also note that there were crucial differences that made the adoption of federalism in the United States more practicable. The determination of legitimate

boundaries, the consensus needed in society, the effect of the economic system and the capacity of the state were all more favorable in the case of the United States (1994: 416). In fact, because of these disputes and technical deficiencies, the new arrangement of power in Ethiopia risked being much more contentious than the previous arrangement (Thomas-Woolley and Keller, 1994: 423). In Ethiopia, mistrust against the federation is rooted historically since the federation between Ethiopia and Eritrea was ultimately a deception. After Emperor Haile Selassie arranged the federation between both states in 1952, Eritrea was increasingly annexed by Ethiopia (Thomas-Woolley and Keller, 1994: 424). Nevertheless, the approach of federalism in a way that responds to the Ethiopian context and guarantees ethnic self-determination contains the possibility of responding more flexible to political problems than the Western models did in other African states. It is thus a positive factor that the EPRDF did not adopt the Western federal system as a blueprint and instead added components that promise to make the political system more suitable for Ethiopia.

2.4 Minority and Ethnic Group Rights

Another factor supporting the success of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia is the trend of international law towards minority protection. The institutionalized protection of ethnic minorities in Ethiopia could therefore gain international approval and secure exterior political support for the Ethiopian government. Will Kymlicka analyzed the adoption of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* by the UN General Assembly in 2007 and argued that it could serve as a “model for other ethno-cultural sub-state groups to seek enhanced recognition and rights” (2009: 1). He found that the protection of indigenous people is based on humanitarian concerns, whereas the protection of national

minorities is concerned with security issues (2009: 1) However, if security concerns are the major cause for the protection of national minorities, it risks to neglect humanitarian aspects and hence to neglect a genuine protection for ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, the recognition of cultural diversity and the institutionalization of minority rights is a crucial factor that contributes to the viability of ethnic federalism. This is even more so since the history of Ethiopia had been characterized by the struggle between central government and regional powers (Sava and Tosco, 2008:112).

The following example demonstrates how important cultural rights have become for different peoples of Ethiopia. The EPRDF once tried to subsume seven linguistic groups by implementing the artificial fusion of these languages called *Wagagoda*. As a response, violent demonstrations broke out in opposition to this policy with numerous deaths (Sava and Tosco, 2008:120). This example illustrates how closely language and identity are related. Lahra Smith even notes that the recognition of linguistic diversity is a precondition for a democratic system:

“Not only are there administrative and political costs to implementing a truly egalitarian language policy in multilingual states such as Ethiopia, but there are significant democratic costs to ignoring language diversity, or pursuing a policy of linguistic domination. There is little doubt that the EPRDF had to include language policy as part of its power-sharing arrangement.” (2008: 235).

It is a positive factor for ethnic federalism in Ethiopia that previous unilingual policies could be at least officially reversed in favor of multilingual policies. Cultural and language policies of the EPRDF have been successful in helping oppressed minorities to gain recognition and to develop confidence in their language and culture since they have obtained their own administration (Aalen, 2006: 256). These conditions certainly form a basis on which different groups might accept the union with Ethiopia.

3. Factors Splitting Ethiopia Apart

3.1 Discrepancy Between Theory and Practice

The promising principles of ethnic self-determination and the protection of minority rights that are manifested in the Constitution could not prevent unexpected backlashes that gave rise to new conflicts. One crucial problem is the discrepancy between the theoretical aims manifested in the Constitution and the political practice by the EPRDF (cp. Fiseha 2006). In contradiction to the principles of regional power devolution and ethnic self-determination stated in the Constitution, the central government has increasingly exerted control over the provinces and has treated ethnic groups discriminatively. For example, the OLF (Oromia Liberation Front) has been excluded from federal elections because of its secessionist ambitions. Ethnic minority activists posing a threat to the unity of Ethiopia have been persecuted by the government and demonstrations before federal elections have been prohibited. In addition, the ethnic federal system has apparently reinforced and distributed human rights violations, for example by imprisoning opponents of the government (Tronvoll, 2008: 52). These developments limit the legitimacy of the central government and the willingness of several groups to identify with a united Ethiopia.

The oppressive tendencies of the central party can be partly explained by the difficulties that Will Kymlicka identified for multinational federalism in non-Western states. He observes that Non-western States apply policies of 'securization' in order to protect the state. These policies, however, limit the capacity of democratic space for minorities. Western states, in contrast, could mostly afford to apply politics of 'de-securization' because they dispose of various levels of law enforcement mechanisms and

effective institutions that are capable of protecting the state. Moreover, most multinational Western states have one or two majority groups so that generally competition over political supremacy has not been menacing the system. In Ethiopia, however, a clear majority of one or two ethnic groups is lacking and each major group poses a potential threat of striving for political control. Hence, the conditions of insecurity in Ethiopia, caused by the lack of protective institutions and by its composure of several competing communities, make it difficult for the government to grant minority freedoms without simultaneously exerting control over those minorities. However, the gap between rhetoric and possible implementation is likely to cause frustration among the population. It would thus be recommendable for the government to reduce the contradiction between theory and practice. This could be achieved through more transparency in policy practice.

3.2 Low Institutional Efficacy

Another factor that endangers the success of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia is the challenge of strengthening the state while devolving power to the regional level. The Ethiopian government is thus faced with a double challenge because it aims at democratizing a previously authoritarian state while promising simultaneously to accommodate a variety of ethnic groups (Aalen 2006: 243). Thomas-Woolley and Keller distinguish between ‘strong’ and ‘soft’ states, citing Goran Hyden who has identified three main features of the ‘soft’ state, which are

“the circumvention of laws and regulations by officials and the inconsistent application of policies and laws, secret collusion between civil servants and politicians whose task it is to supervise the implementation of policies and the use of corruption to secure objectives other than those officially stated” (Thomas-Woolley and Keller, 1994: 421).

Ethiopia is facing the typical features of a 'weak state'. The lack of trust in the state leads to the abuse of power, which in turn reduces the willingness of citizens to obey its rules. As a result, the state adopts authoritarian practices which contradict the objectives manifested in the Constitution. The promise of regional autonomy and simultaneous exercise of central control, however, reduces the support for the federal government because people feel betrayed. For this reasons, Aalen states that "Meles Zenawi's regime may end up as a victim of its own authoritarianism" (Aalen, 2006: 261).

A further problem is that state power is perceived as a key resource for which one must compete because of the high chances for personal revenue that political positions offer. This zero-sum attitude provokes that local advocates of ethnic politics follow the central discourse or try to benefit from their ethnic status instead of representing actual needs of their community. Teferi therefore states that recruiting local advocates of ethnic politics and promoting self-determination are contradictory objectives (Teferi 2004: 612).

In addition, due to the weak service provided by the state, kinship and ethnicity have become important organizational structures to provide basic needs. Peter Ekeh notes that the state in Africa has been the source of pain instead of providing protection, a trend which has continued since colonialism:

"Kinship was the Hobbesian response to the untold suffering and insecurities that the alliance of foreign interests and the African state system inflicted on ordinary individuals in the centuries of the slave trade and colonialism" (Ekeh, 2004: 31).

He explains the divide between ethnic kinship and national belonging in Africa with the different development of protection systems in Europe and Africa. Whereas in European history the state could establish a relation of trust to its citizen because they were

effectively protected, the state in Africa is viewed with suspicion because of the threat that it occasionally poses to its own citizens:

“A clear feature of modern Africa is that ordinary men and women still regard the state as a foreign construction managed by those who bear no allegiance to them. But it is a totally different matter with their kinship institutions (...). In the kinship domain, morality counts- unlike the state realm which is distrusted by the ordinary men and women who see it as seeded with amoral arrogance” (Ekeh, 2004: 35).

Ekeh argues that the state should therefore be trained to treat individuals as citizens who own the state in order to develop democracy. He claims that democracy will stop to be a danger in Africa only if individuals learn how to trust in the state (2004: 36). Thus, the functions of the state in Ethiopia are different to those in Western states. The lack of trust in the relationship between the state and its citizens are the reason for low institutional efficacy. Weak institutions, however, are a major factor which endangers the success of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia.

3.3 Top-Down Politics

Even though the regime change started from within the population, power relations have shifted to a new hierarchy that can be characterized by top-down politics. The federal government has exercised increasing control over the autonomous regions, thus excluding locals from political participation. The extensive control may have been necessary for state security; however, it is further eroding the trust in the government and alienating local people from politics. Therefore, Keller has described Ethiopia as a ‘putting together’ federation, following Alfred Stepan’s distinction of ‘holding together’ and ‘coming together’ federations (Keller, 2002: 46). Initially, Ethiopia’s federation was intended to hold the different ethnic groups together. Presently, however, the central state has the power to decide which ethnic group has the right to a proper administration. In

addition, most state revenues are used by the government to pay administration, so that regions dispose only over small amounts of revenues. Aalen argues that a federation cannot be genuine if it is a result of coercion from above (2006: 244). The new power hierarchy raises thus doubts about the credibility of the central government. Abbink argues that “the post 1991-regime (...) basically only ‘decentralized’ the problems by defining the sources of conflict to be on the local and not national level” (2006: 390). Thus, decentralization is not enough to avoid ethnic conflict. It becomes clear that the question of how access to state resources is regulated is much more important than the question who has access to state resources. Another drawback of power exertion from above is that it has destroyed many forms of traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution. Since all resolution of conflict has to conform to government measures, grassroots organizations are usually not consulted, even though they have strategies of avoiding conflict that are more effective than the state proposals (Abbink, 2006: 401). The controlled autonomy erodes thus the support for the federal government, because the demands for ethnic autonomy are not sufficiently addressed. Regions with secessionist demands will only be willing to compromise into an ethnic federation if they have a substantial measure of influence. Otherwise, demands for secession are likely to continue.

3.4 Unaddressed Asymmetries

The Ethiopian federation is based on equal rights of cultures or ethnic groups for self-determination. The equal treatment, however, does not take into account the differences between regions and ethnic groups which differ enormously in size, social categories or ethnic dispersion. According to Galeotti, “the crucial problem of the liberal model of political toleration lies in the reductionist attitude toward the differences and the claims at

stake when toleration questions arise” (1993: 594). The statement directed towards multicultural societies in Western states also applies for the handling of ethnic diversity in Ethiopia. The right to ethnic self-determination may have completely different consequences for a small and dispersed ethnic group as it has for a concentrated large ethnic community. Oromians, for example, would favor more recognition as a nation, whereas members of dispersed ethnic communities may need individual protection. By treating all ethnic groups equal, new injustices will be created. Thus, Galeotti argues that the party that advocates difference is not supporting injustice, but a “comprehensive view of equality and rejects only the ideal of equality as *sameness* or *likeness*” (1993: 595).

In addition, other factors than ethnicity are important organizing factors in society. For example, the position of women, elders, immigrants, refugees or professionals is not addressed when society is divided along ethnic lines. Nancy Fraser states that “the identity model obscures the struggles within social groups for the authority, and indeed for the power, to represent them” (Fraser, 2001: 24). She proposes therefore the ‘status model’, which provides recognition based on the status of group members instead of group-specific identity (2001: 24). Her suggestion is to “de-institutionalize patterns of cultural value that impede parity of participation and to replace them with patterns that foster it” (2001: 25). Citing Axel Honneth, Fraser points out that economic inequality is due to a cultural order which privileges some kind of labor over others, and that changing that order would suffice the redistribute resources (Fraser, 2001: 29). This holds for Ethiopia because through the empowerment of the EPRDF, certain clusters of age, gender, ethnicity, locality and occupation have become privileged over others. This becomes clear through a case study by Abate Anem Teferi. He has examined how

farmers in Aba Saelama in the north-east of Ethiopia have been affected by power devolution to the regional level. The farmers noted an unprecedented rapid growth of registered local party memberships, while they viewed the local government as an extension of central state control (Teferi, 2004: 626). Instead of being addressee of decentralized politics, local farmers have become observers of a politicization of which they are not part. Teferi concludes that the “new emphasis on ‘local governance’ and ‘democracy’ has not yet penetrated into rural Ethiopia” (Teferi, 2004: 628). On the contrary, the intervention of the state was more often needed, because rivals often allied with state power against adversaries (Teferi, 2004: 618).

The ignorance of asymmetries across society through equal treatment on the basis of ethnicity is a simplification of social relations and leads to new injustices. The lack of recognizing differences and taking group status into account is therefore further delegitimizing the central government.

3.5 Static Concept of Ethnicity

The reinforcement of ethnic identities and the primordial understanding of ethnicity constitute a core problem of ethnic federalism. The concept of ethnicities as fixed identities facilitates the strategic use of membership and easily generates ethnic essentialism. In analogy to the way in which nationalities are constructed, ethnicity is formed by its politicization. Just as the sense of nationality in nation states has been misused by political systems that were striving for supremacy, ethnic identity has been reshaped in order to pursue political goals. Benedict Anderson describes in *Imagined Communities* how the momentum of a specific culture can be haphazardly elevated to a standard model and exploited for political purposes:

“It remains only to emphasize that in their origins, the fixing of print-languages and the differentiation of status between them were largely unselfconscious processes resulting from the explosive interaction between capitalism, technology and human linguistic diversity. But as with so much else in the history of nationalism, once 'there', they could become formal models to be imitated, and, where expedient, consciously exploited in a Machiavellian spirit.” (Anderson, 1983: 45)

The process of constructing ethnic identities throughout history illustrates the flexibility and arbitrariness of ethnic identity. From an anthropological perspective, ethnicity is a “part-identity, marked by discursive flexibility and selective use. There is no autonomous primordial logic in 'ethnic' group relations that emanates in conflict” (Abbink, 2006: 403). Bruce Berman notes that class and ethnicity are often intertwined rather than being contradictory sources of identity and social solidarity (Berman 2004). It is thus problematic to combine access to political positions and resources with ethnic identity. Instead, belonging to a certain community is a factor which is more decisive for the social and political position of an individual than their assigned ethnicity.

Politics based on ethnicity are not necessarily leading to interethnic conflict. John Lonsdale distinguishes two possible ways in which ethnicity can become political, ‘ethnic morality’ and ‘political tribalism’. Whereas ‘ethnic morality’ describes the ethnic identity claimed within a community, ‘political tribalism’ is the emphasis on ethnicity of different ethnic communities in interaction (2004: 76). In both cases, the concept of ‘autochthony’ and ethnicity is used to justify a position of power or access to resources (cp. Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005). If the state encourages ‘political tribalism’, it increases the risks for ethnic conflict. Contrary, the state counteracts ‘political tribalism’ by supporting interethnic networks. A study of various multiethnic cities in India has shown that in those cities where formal and informal networks between Moslems and Hindus existed, peace was maintained after incidents occurred that triggered violent conflicts in cities

without interethnic ties (Varshney, 2001). A positive example of ethnic cooperation in Ethiopia can be found in the solution of a dispute between Berta and Gumuz people. Their conflict was resolved by arranging proportional power-sharing and accepting Amharic as the official language of regional administration (Abbink, 2006: 402). The success of this example lies in the fact that the solution was disputed and ultimately decided by the people concerned. If interethnic cooperation exists even before a conflict arises, the chances that an autonomous solution succeeds are much higher.

Ethnicity is also often combined with the concept of autochthonous privileges. From a historical perspective, the concept of autochthony is non-existent because of constantly changing patterns of inhabitants. Ceuppens and Geschiere note that “autochthony may invoke stasis as some sort of norm. But for historians (...) movement is the norm: All history starts with migration” (2005: 402). However, both in Europe and Africa notions of ‘autochthony’ are often used to defend the rights of the locals with competing interests (Ceuppens and Geschiere, 2005: 387). This may lead to the discrimination of migrants, who appear as invaders to people who perceive themselves as ‘sons of the soil’ (cp. Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005). For example, drought victims of northern Gondar, Tigray and Wollo regions have experienced discrimination based on the argument of autochthony when they migrated to other regions (Abbink, 2006: 398). In addition, interviewed farmers stated that they were concerned about whether they would be able to move freely and settle in other parts of the country because of the ethnic division of Ethiopia (Teferi, 2004: 623). Hence, the Ethiopian Constitution evokes the primordial’s view of ethnicity because it defines Ethiopians as peoples and nationalities without providing the option for a supra-national identity (Aalen, 2006: 247).

3.6 Absence of an Overarching Identity and Trust

The EPRDF succeeded to promote ethnic and cultural expression, but it has failed to simultaneously foster a voluntary pan-Ethiopian identity. It has thus neglected the claim for unity made by many Ethiopians (Abbink, 2006: 393). For example, the CUD, a party that promotes Ethiopian unity, was banned by President Meles Zenawi in the competition with the EPRDF during the 2005 elections. In the subsequent protests, more than hundred protesters were killed and more than thousand detained (Aalen, 2006: 252). The urge for self-determination has been generalized in the politics of the EPRDF regardless of many Ethiopians who supported the concept of a 'Greater Ethiopia', envisioned as a multiethnic unitary state:

“Many felt that they were Ethiopians first and Amharas, Guarages, Oromos, Somalis, and Afaris second. Consequently, serious political conflict continues to exist over the primacy of ethnicity as opposed to a national identity among citizens” (Thomas-Woolley and Keller, 1994: 425).

It is important to note that the promotion of an overall identity could prevent ethnic conflict because the commitment to a common citizenship could neutralize claims for secession and lead to interethnic cooperation (Aalen, 2006: 244). An overall Ethiopian identity could hopefully further reduce the neglect of groups that constitute a minority within rather homogenous ethnic districts. This common citizenship, however, could only be achieved if the “principles that govern the basic structure of society are fair and are independent of diverse moral doctrines and commitments” (Ejobowah, 2004: 302). That is, an overall identity could only be successful if the central government practices non-discriminatory politics. This is, however, difficult at the present moment because of the different visions that people have of Ethiopia's future (cp. Gudina 2006).

Lonsdale poses the interesting question if such an identity could also be created bottom-up:

“Could ethnic electorates pool their local critiques of power, encouraged by the inter-ethnicity that often underwrites survival among the poor, to build a common citizenship against the prejudices inflamed by political tribalism? In the absence of socio-economic conditions for liberal or social democracy, can the only indigenous sources of change, namely, outraged moral ethnicities, unite?” (2004: 81).

In this case, class alliances would be built across ethnic lines in order to fight corrupt elites. Building cooperations to achieve common goals seems to be a promising approach to alleviate ethnic conflict, as the example of communities in India has shown (cp. Varshney 2001). Besides, it would simultaneously address the problem of corruption and unfair distribution of resources. The case of ethnic federalism in Nigeria has shown that while questions of ethnic identity were successfully addressed, economic problems became out of control. High rates of corruption turned Nigeria into one of Africa's poorest countries regardless of its rich oil resources (Turton 2006: 6). The example of Nigeria demonstrates that some degree of central control is necessary to protect the national economy and to ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to participate in it rightfully.

The promotion of unity would furthermore require a considerable amount of trust. However, the present relation between the government and its citizens is still characterized by mistrust (Aalen, 2006: 256). This is partly due to the difference between Western and non-Western countries in relation to trust mentioned earlier with reference to Peter Ekeh. The history of individualism and nationalism in Western states has trained individuals to trust in the concept of the state, its institutions and government. In African societies, trust did not emerge on the basis of individualism and nationalism, but rested mostly on family or regional group ties. According to Ekeh, the government can gain its

citizens' trust only if it considers traditional ties of trust and slowly generates trust by establishing a genuine and fair relationship to its citizens (cp. Ekeh 2004). As long as the state ignores the complexity of identity and applies discriminatory ethnic policies, large scale trust cannot be established. Consequently, the unity of Ethiopia remains fragile.

4 Potential of Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia

The juxtaposition of unifying and separating factors of the system of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia has demonstrated that there are some factors that jeopardize the current system. However, since other factors that are promising for its success, addressing some of the most urgent problems could help to improve the current conditions and to reduce ethnic disputes. From the discussion above, I have filtered three points that appear to be crucial for the survival of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia.

1. It is important to reflect the different ethnic and social structures in Ethiopian society without fixing identities in a static image. The recognition of these conditions would entail the adoption of individual minority protection and a more flexible interpretation of identity that does not solely rest on ethnic categories. That means, whereas ethnic and cultural heritage should be protected and fostered, it is probably not a useful basis for access to resources and political participation. Instead, an emphasis of multi-ethnic parties could be promoted to reduce mistrust against ethnically biased political parties.

2. Communities networks could prove to be a useful source in overcoming ethnic conflict and simultaneously reducing abuse of power by the elites. On the base of

interethnic cooperation, a network of regional trust is established which could avoid the increase of corruption. Illegal transfer of resources would be more often interrupted if the communities are well connected and collaborating. Ethnic tensions could be addressed with on a dialogic approach if the interethnic network is stable, and therefore prevent violent conflict based on identity.

3. Finally, it would be useful to invest in the relation between government and citizens in order to foster democracy. Trust might be generated if the government provides transparency and consistency in its policies. The adoption and support of traditional forms of democracy could prove to be helpful in integrating the state into the already existing networks of trust.

5 Conclusion

After the overthrow of the Derg, the new government of Ethiopia has adopted a democratic system which could be regarded as a precursor in the field of ethnic self-determination in Africa. By making large allowances to ethnic groups, the central government hoped to avoid the actual claim for those rights, for example the right to secession. However, the revolutionary optimism during the beginning of the new system has been altered by ongoing disputes between ethnic groups. It has become clear that ethnic self-determination on its own is not sufficient to create a voluntary unity within Ethiopia. According to Aalen, "Ethiopia lacks two basic pre-conditions for mitigating ethnic conflicts in federal states: a democratic system of governance and an inclusive and sustainable pan-national identity" (2006: 260). In other words, the contradiction of the

constitutional promises and the actual restrictive practices of the EPRDF, as well as the lack of a common identity erode the legitimacy of the federal government, which might lead to its breakup if it does not take measures that interconnect ethnic communities and promote a fairer access to resources. As Berman noted, “policies for social diversity, multiculturalism and social cohesion must be set within a national policy context that pursues stability and security focused on all citizens” (2008: 13). The EPRDF has responded to the suppressive past of Ethiopia with guaranteeing extreme ethnic liberties. The conditions in Ethiopia, however, are not suitable for these concessions and require more state intervention than the EPRDF was originally willing to do. In order to mitigate the need for state authoritarianism, it would be necessary to foster traditional elements of trust, interethnic cooperation and an overarching identity. These factors would lay the foundation for a stable government, which consequently could govern with less authoritarianism.

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