

Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia: A Comparative Regional Study by Asnake Kefale

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Asnake Kefale works at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. He has many years research experience in federalism and its consequences in Ethiopia— he has published numerous articles and chapters on these subjects. Among his published works, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia* is the focus of this review.

During the last half a century, Ethiopia has witnessed three regimes that differed from each other in ideology, internal composition, ethnic and social policies as well as foreign policy. While the Imperial and Socialist Ethiopia were characterized by a high level of centralization, since 1991, a post-Socialist Ethiopia is characterized by its would be promise of a new setting that was supposed to open the door for ethnic and religious equality, and some kind of decentralization so that the decision-making process would get closer to the people. The initial hopes and anticipation were great as Ethiopia was exhausted by the Eritrean war and groups such as the Tigray People's Liberation Front, Oromo Liberation Front, and many others, which struggled the regime of Mengistu. In 1991 and 1992, the two mentioned parties also played significant role in the political roundtable talks, but failed to find a mutual understanding.

Federalism can be found in many countries with various features depending on different socio-economic, historical, political, cultural as well as religious contexts. In the case of Ethiopia, ethnicity, as a direct result of failed aspirations of minorities during the Derg era, became the most debated issue in politics since 1991. Therefore, a greater focus on ethnicity was needed to fulfill hopes of people who fought against the previous regime. Since the early 1990s, ethnic federalism in Ethiopia has become a matter of analytical works of numerous political scientists and anthropologists (e. g. Cohen, 1995; Abbink, 1997; Keller, 2002; Abbink, 2006; Wondwosen & Zahorik, 2008). One of the fresh monographs that deal with federalism in Ethiopia is Asnake Kefale's *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia*, which in its case studies, focuses on two 'peripheral' regions— Benishangul-Gumuz and Somali.

According to the author, one of the significant problems of today's Ethiopia is actually the lack of genuine decentralization which is usually associated with federalism. In Ethiopia, as also the author shows, what rather exists is centralized form of federal rule where "policy decisions come from the centre and the sub-units are responsible for its implementation" (p. 43). In other words, there is a visible dependency of regions on the center where an absolute power of ruling Ethiopian is possessed (or monopolized) by Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The logic behind the book is clear: the issue of federalism needs more evaluation and

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understanding. Further, as to the author, various regions of the country witness and experience many levels of local and regional conflicts (even with international dimension). Therefore, it is necessary to understand the structure of such a conflict and its relation to the current political patterns, in this case the so-called 'ethnic federalism'.

Federal composition of the country in its current shape and ethnic identity being the number one principle of this version of federalism also generate or at least transform various local, regional or trans-border conflicts along identity lines. The most significant examples is the Silte-Gurage identity dispute which resulted in recognition of Silte separate ethnic identity although they were traditionally considered part of the Gurage ethnic group. After this success, some other minorities tend to follow what the author calls the 'Silte model' (p. 52). In addition to these identity conflicts, the author distinguishes between intra-federal boundary conflicts, intra-regional conflicts in multi-ethnic regions, and conflicts between titular and non-titular groups (pp. 52-56).

As has been said earlier, in the reviewed book emphasis is given to two regions with very different historical experiences and ethnic composition as well as ecological setting, but with certain kind of similarity when it comes to their position within the state— Benishangul-Gumuz and Somali regional states. What is quite common with both regions is their physical remoteness proved by the fact that there exists only minimal infrastructure. While the Somali region is inhabited by Somali speaking people who are at least linguistically related to their fellows in neighboring Somalia, Benishangul-Gumuz is inhabited by various groups that form a marginal area both in Ethiopia and neighboring Sudan. Each of these regions has never been tightly controlled by the Ethiopian state, and remained a periphery.

Despite a relative ethnic homogeneity of the Somali regional state, federalism in Ethiopia led to the emergence of what is called by the author as 'clan autonomy conflicts'. This refers to those conflicts 'that emerged after the formation of the region over such issues as control of administrative structures, like *kebele* and *woreda*, clan representation, identity and others' (p. 83). One of the reasons why these conflicts are on the rise is lack of 'congruence between the geographic jurisdiction of *woreda* and *kebele* with clan boundaries' (p. 83).

The conflict between titular and non-titular groups in Benishangul-Gumuz is another result of the federal restructuring of the country. Various groups that inhabit the region have accepted this formation differently. By restructuring of the region, while those marginalized minorities have gained the status of 'owner nationalities' (p. 100), the non-titular groups have become new minorities. In the case of Benishangul-Gumuz, the book reads about a significant part of population composed of mainly Amhara and Oromo speaking settlers who call for more equal political representation. Discrepancies can be found everywhere. As the author shows, non-titular groups are rather discriminated when it comes to confiscation of farmland, access to post-secondary colleges, universities and many other issues (p. 103).

Both regions, as examined in chapters seven and eight, also show a significant level of inter-state conflicts which mostly derive from the fact that the boundaries are ill-defined and do not respect local realities. In the case of the Somali regional state, major conflict obviously take place along Oromia and Afar borders having historical roots going back to the Imperial times. One of those most visible places of conflict lies in the town of Moyale, on Ethio-Kenyan borders where both Oromia and Somali regional states' claims are evident since the early 1990s. The dispute has brought severe challenges to Oromo and Somali groups with dual identities as ethnic identity

at this place has become an instrument of inclusion and exclusion (p. 113). In the case of Benishangul-Gumuz and Amhara regions, the border is still rather vaguely delineated but perhaps surprisingly no major conflict is seen over there. However, disputes between the former and Oromia regions are more tangible due to the history of relationship between Oromo Liberation Front and groups inhabiting the neighboring areas of what is now called Benishangul-Gumuz. As the author discusses, OLF wanted to incorporate groups like Gumuz, Mao, and Komo into 'independent Oromia' as the so-called 'Black Oromos' (p. 136). Moreover, a recent trend which involves bringing more Oromo farmers to Benishangul-Gumuz gives rise to disagreement and possible conflict between the two entities.

Last issue examined in the book (in chapter nine) is the centre-regional relations in a comparative perspective. Obviously, despite theoretical proclamations, the two regions still belong to what may be called a 'periphery' as they were not fully incorporated into functioning state structures. Despite many shortcomings, existence of these regions brought at least some positive changes including better access to education, health care, infrastructure, and etc.

Asnake Kefale's account on federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia is valuable and highly recommendable for interested readers. By structuring conflicts into various categories and comparing two very distinct regions as the Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz, the author has reached his goal to increase the debate over the shape of federalism in Ethiopia. The main contribution of this book lies in the fact that the issue of federalism is still very acute and 'tangible' in Ethiopia, especially with its so repeatedly criticized 'ethnic' variety. Asnake Kefale's valuable insight, which was based on field work in both discussed regions, shows that federalism – when it is not taken in an appropriate form and when its functioning is not well developed and managed—can cause serious troubles. As some of the issues are not 'invented' by federalism itself and they have longer historical roots, the book, thus, should be recommended to all who are interested in federalism, problems of federalism, modern history and politics of Ethiopia, conflicts and political systems in Africa, or simply modern and contemporary history of Ethiopia.

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