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 "Ethnic Federalism" in Ethiopia

John M. Cohen

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## Additional Information

**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

"Ethnic Federalism" in Ethiopia John M. Cohen Harvard Institute for International Development The problems of "nations within states," the "coming anarchy," and the "restoration of collapsed states" have been widely discussed of late.<sup>1</sup> Currently, a number of political leaders, aid agency professionals, and academics are examining the utility of administrative decentralization reforms as a strategy for responding to ethnic, religious, and regional separatists in countries as diverse as Sri Lanka, Somalia, and Mexico. Their discussion of federal, confederal, and devolved unitary models of administrative decentralization is informed by few case studies explicitly focused on the administrative and financial issues faced by war-torn states seeking to use decentralization as a strategy for reconstruction.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this article is provide such an example by documenting the complex implementation issues faced by the initial Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE: 1991-1994) and the recently established Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE: 1995-) as they sought to reconstruct a post-imperial state based on what is increasingly labeled as "ethnic federalism." Terminology Four terminological issues complicate a review of Ethiopia's recent experience . First, the Western term "ethnic" is used here even though in Amharic Ethiopian, officials use the term "nation" or "nationality."<sup>3</sup> Second, the term "federal" is used even though some knowledgeable observers argue, as demonstrated shortly, that even if the 1994 Constitu- © Northeast African Studies (ISSN 0740-9133) Vol. 2, No. 2 (New Series) 1995, pp. 157-188 257 258 John M. Cohen tion labels the new country as a federal state it is in fact based on a constitutional system more akin to "confederation," an innovative form that looks like federalism but appears closer to an international treaty among ethnic groups having the power to secede.<sup>4</sup> Third, the term "state" is used to describe the component parts of the new federation because this is the term used in the English translation of the new Constitution . But this is done with the recognition that the Amharic version of the Constitution, as well as both Amharic and English translations of proclamations issued between 1991 and 1993, use the terms "national regional administrations."<sup>5</sup> Fourth, the forms and types of "decentralization" are carelessly used by some analysts of the Ethiopian case. To avoid this, the article uses the dominant public administration conceptual definitions of "administrative decentralization" and its three types: déconcentration, devolution, and delegation.<sup>6</sup> Early Adoption of Ethnic Federal Strategy The TGE was established by a Charter adopted by a July 1991 National Conference of political groups.<sup>7</sup> From the beginning the Government has been dominated by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition controlled by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which seized power from the military government of Mengistu Haile Mariam.<sup>8</sup> Its leader, Meles Zenawi, was named president in 1991. Shortly thereafter, despite the persistence of fundamental problems related to the politics of ethnicity and administrative and fiscal capacity, the TGE began to take steps aimed at effectively reaching a large and formidable number of transition objectives. These were to draft a constitution, hold regional elections, rebuild physical infrastructure , implement macroeconomic and land tenure reforms aimed at stimulating the economy, rehabilitate public service infrastructures, reform the judiciary, promote human rights, support the emergence of an independent media, decentralize power to regions and districts, and encourage the emergence of a free press and democratically oriented civic organizations.<sup>9</sup> One of the first of these objectives addressed by the TGE was the decentralization of administrative and fiscal authority to regions and the local-level units. Leaders of the TGE pushed this initiative because they "Ethnic Federalism" in Ethiopia 159 were convinced it was essential to: (1) reducing the inter-ethnic conflict that has divided Ethiopian society for centuries; (2) promoting equitable material conditions in all areas of the country; and (3) improving the efficiency and effectiveness of public sector performance at the field level. They argued they could use political and administrative devolution to promote these objectives without threatening other important objectives, such as economic growth and political stability. Between August 1991 and November 1993 several Proclamations were issued that began the process of devolving public sector powers and tasks to...

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