

Lovise Aalen. *The Politics of Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Actors, Power and Mobilization under Ethnic Federalism*, E. J. Brill Publishers, 2011, paper, 214pp. \$89.00

Lovise Aalen's 214-page book, *The Politics of Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Actors, Power and Mobilization Under Ethnic Federalism*, is made up of a laconic preface, eight substantive chapters, abbreviations, selected glossary, references and an index. In the prologue, the author lays down the foundation, on which the University of Oslo's Political Science Department revised doctoral research is based (p. viii).

The author uses the preface to offer the thrust of this important book, which claims to be an exploration of a unique governance system, in which the government of Ethiopia institutionalized an ethnic federal system, the like of which no nation-state on the African continent had dared to implement. Even so Nigeria, a multi-ethnic state, practices a "quasi-constitutional and institutionalized" ethnic federalism of sorts in her 36 states (which can still be seen geographically as the East, the North and the West).

One wonders what federalism entails that is critical to the argumentation and comprehension of this timely volume. This is particularly so, as the definition of federalism is very complex, and so are the characteristics of its appurtenances in societies, where it is institutionalized.¹ For example, Kenneth C. Wheare has, in fact, defined federalism as a "method of dividing powers so that the general and regional governments are each, within a sphere, coordinate and independent."² Furthermore, Ghana's late President Kwame Nkrumah explained federalism in the following terms:

[It is a system] that delegates to a supreme federal government certain powers or functions inherent in themselves or in their sovereign or separate capacity. In its turn, the federal or union government, in the exercise of those specific powers, acts directly on the individual citizen no less than upon the communities making up the federation. The separate states retain unimpaired their individual sovereignty in respect of the residual power un-allocated to the central or federal authority. The citizens of the federal states owe a double allegiance, one to the individual state, and the other to federal government.³

¹ D. J. Elazar, "International and Comparative Federalism" *Political Science*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (1993): 190-194; Ronald L. Watts, "Federalism, Federal Political Systems, and Federation," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 1 (1998): 117-137; M. Burgess and A. G. Gagnon (eds.), *Comparative Federalism and Federation: Competing Traditions and Future Directions* (Hemel Hemstead, United Kingdom: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993): xix; E. E. Osaghae, "Reassessment of federalism as a degree of decentralization," *Publius: Journal of Federalism*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1990): 83-98; Anna Gamper, "A Global Theory of Federalism: The Nature and Challenges of a Federal States," *German Law Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 10 (October 1, 2005): 1297-1318; Daniel Weinstock, "Toward a Normative Theory of Federalism," *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 167 (2001): 75-83; E. Ike Udogu, "Liberal Democracy and Federalism in Contemporary Politics," in Toyin Falola (ed.), *Nigeria in the 20th Century* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press 2002): 333-348.; E. Ike Udogu, *Confronting the Challenges and Prospects in the Creation of a Union of African States in the 21st Century* (Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2010): 167-201.

² Kenneth C. Wheare, *Federal Government 4th edition* (London: Oxford University Press 1963): 10.

³ Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite* (New York: International Publishers 1972): 205.

It is against the backdrop of an inadequate application of the preceding suppositions in Ethiopian ethnic federalism that this book may be comprehended (p. 5). To be sure, Article 39 (1-4), under the title "The Rights of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples," of the 1991 constitution of Ethiopia addresses the unique constitutional rights of ethnic groups in the federal arrangement. Specifically and *inter alia*, it states in the following numbered paragraphs that: (1) Every nation, nationality or people in Ethiopia shall have the unrestricted right to self-determination up to secession . . .; and (3) Every nation, nationality or people in Ethiopia shall have the unrestricted right to administer itself, and this shall include the right to establish government institutions within the territory it inhabits and the right to fair representation in the federal and state governments . . .⁴

Within the foregoing context, Aalen examined two case studies (Sidama and Wolayta) of ethnic political mobilization in one of the states, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS), in Ethiopia. For that reason, this book touches on two themes: that (1) it "addresses the link between political institutions and political behavior by scrutinizing the relationship between federalism and the mobilization of ethnic identities (p. vii);" and (2) it draws upon the contested theories of constructivism and instrumentalism in the discourse and study of political ethnicity, Aalen examined the hypothesis that "ethnic political mobilization cannot be understood as exclusively an outcome of struggle over resources (p. viii)."

Chapter one of the book is sub-titled, "Introduction: The Limits of institutions in Multi-ethnic societies," while chapter two has the title, "National Self-determination: Federalism the Ethiopian Way." Both provide the theoretical superstructure on which the succeeding chapters rest. Chapter one reiterates a central tenet in Article 39 which, *inter alia*, grants each ethnic group or nationality the right to govern its own community and the freedom to secede if appropriate conditions are attained (p. 1). The assumption is that given the conflictive nature of political ethnicity in multiethnic societies, one way to mitigate its centrifugal tendencies in Ethiopian polity would be to create ethnic states whose function would be coordinate with those of the central government in Addis Ababa – at least in theory.

In touching on what constitutes an ethnic group, a definition is offered in a general sense as the following:

a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood. Examples of such symbolic elements are: kinship patterns, physical contiguity (as in localism or sectionalism), religious affiliation, language or dialect forms, tribal affiliation, nationality, pheno-typical features, or any consciousness of kind among members of the group.⁵

⁴ Constitution of Ethiopia: http://www.africa.upenn.edu/hornet/Ethiopian_constitution.html.

⁵ R. A. Schermerhorn, *Comparative Ethnic Relations* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1978): 12; see also J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smith (eds.), *Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press): 6; E. Ike Udogu, "Ethnicity and Theory in African Politics," in E. Ike Udogu (ed.), *The Issue of Political Ethnicity in Africa* (Aldershot, United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing Ltd 2001): 13-34.

Moreover, Manning Nash avers that

cultural categories with social and group referents are the focus of ethnic inquiry. Where there is a group, there is some sort of boundary, and where there are boundaries, there are some mechanisms to maintain them. . . . cultural markers of kinship, commensality, and religious cult are, from the point of view of the analyst, a single recursive metaphor. This metaphor of blood, substance, and deity symbolize the existence of the group . . . This trinity of boundary markers and mechanisms is the deep or basic structure on ethnic group differentiation. [They] separate ethnic groupings from other kinds of social aggregates, groups, and entities.⁶

Advancing beyond the theoretical explications of the foregoing characteristics of ethnicity and the politics of the various cleavages-*cum*-institutionalization of ethnic federalism in the nation-state, Aalen sought to study how the procedure of executing the notion of national self-determination has played itself out in the society (p. 3). The central focus, however, is on the ethnic rivalry between two ethnic groups – Wolayta and Sidama – domiciled in SNNPRS. Chapter one also provides a blow by blow synopsis of each chapter (pp. 22-24).

Substantively, chapter two of *The Politics of Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Actors, Power and Mobilization Under Ethnic Federalism* tackles why the doctrine of national self-determination, that in President Woodrow Wilson's advocacy following WWI, was intended to further international peace and security if groups were allowed to choose a political system that would be best suited for them. There is no smoke without fire is a popular cliché that was not lost in this analysis. Accordingly, Aalen goes further in chapter two to explain why the dominant political party, Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), invented this genus of governance – ethnic federalism in Ethiopia.

Paradoxically, the military junta and cabal that governed the society, under a Marxist philosophy before the advent of EPRDF, saw no "use" for ethnic identity. It, accordingly, emphasized the doctrine of "pan-Ethiopianism" or pan-Ethiopian nationalism (p. 31). However, the strong attachment to ethnic identity and the drive for national self-determination could not be wished away. Consequently, an attempt to superimpose nation-state nationalism on ethno-nationalism was an impossible mission as some ethnic groups took up arms against the Military also referred to as the Derg (pp. 32-33). The defeat of the Derg and subsequent transfer of power to the EPRDF meant that the party had to control the uneasiness among ethnic groups that demanded their right to self-determination.

One strategy to allay this angst was to grant, on paper, ethnic autonomy to the nationalities possibly based on expediency. For example, it was recognized that: "the strong position of the EPRDF is that the boundary between the party and the state bureaucracy is blurred. This enables the ruling party to utilize the state administration, from the federal level down to the local level for its own purpose (p. 47)." This EPRDF's policy is not in sync with the "true doctrine" of federalism as noted earlier. Perhaps the preceding strategy, *inter alia*, led Aalen to refer to the peculiarity of this ethnic federalism as "federalism the Ethiopian Way."

⁶ Manning Nash, *The Cauldron of Ethnicity in the Modern World* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1989): 10-15; see also Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (London: Fontana Press 1983).

Chapter three of the publication, "The Historical Trajectories of Local Ethnic Polities: The Sidama and the Wolayta," brings into the limelight the dictum that "self-and group-interest will nearly always trump ideologies and beliefs in interpersonal, group and political interactions." Little wonder, then, that Aalen asserts that the "chapter sketches out the major historical lines of the Wolayta and the Sidama and then looks at how they have reinvented or reinterpreted these histories to suit their present needs (p. 54)." The issue here is the extent to which each ethno-nationalist group is hell bent on pursuing its interest at a given moment, even at the expense of the other, notwithstanding their historical, cultural, sociological characteristics and standing in the geographical community they inhabit together. In such a case conflict may arise over issues that are beneficial to the contending groupings. The demonization and relegation of the histories and cultures of the "other" or "out-group" in order to assume a privileged position in the larger society is commonplace; and also the claim of heroism in battle and exposure to instruments of modernism could be invoked as evidence with which to demonstrate the "superiority" of one group over the other (p. 92).

Chapter four, "Ethnic Politics in Play: Implementing Self-determination in a South Ethiopian Context," underscores the problems in the central government's attempts to impose its authority on groups that seek greater self-rule in the management of their own affairs. Admittedly, the more the EPRDF in Addis Ababa attempted to enforce its suzerainty over the sub-units in the federal arrangement, the more ethnic groups affirmed their right to national self-determination (p. 95). Because of the opposing views of the EPRDF that stressed the strategy of ethnic political mobilization to promote its interests, and conversely ethno-nationalists resistance in SNNPRS, of EPRD policies, it was clear that the central government and the regional administration were on a collision course (p. 99). Their clashing interests over the administrative locus of authority were difficult to resolve.

In chapter five, "Crafting Ethnic politics: The Formation of Parties in Sidama and Wolayta," Aalen sums up his opinions thus: "A major argument of this book is that the analysis and understanding of ethnic political mobilization must have a wide scope, transcending the traditional political science focus on institutions and formal structures of political power . . . [this study, therefore, looks at] how the EPRDF's strategy of forming ethnic based parties either related to or disregarded the cultural, social, [economic], and historical context of the two communities, and . . . why political mobilization has turned divisive in Sidama and Wolayta (p. 107)." Flowing from this chapter is the discourse on the sanctity of institutionalism and structuralism as critical elements in the successful governance of a political system. This thought is challenged in this chapter and *a priori* the Ethiopian political system in general. Indeed, given the failure of political institutions and structures to function efficiently in many democratic polities today, a shift toward the revisualization of this theory as essential for operating a government and administration may be called for. The conversations on this matter should, like those of scholars on post-modernism, center on post-institutionalism and structuralism, in light of the lessons learned from the economic imbroglio and crisis in the Occident. In short, human greediness – especially those of powerful tycoons who interact with politicians and actors in government – have made an effective operation of institutions and structures less salient. The difficulty of EPRDF institutionalizing "genuine" federal character in its governance technique in Ethiopia, due to the influence of ethnic actors with political clout, bears the above argument out in this chapter.

Chapter six, "Dealing with Local Minorities: The Persistence of Discriminatory Practices under Ethnic Federalism," brings to the fore the problems that most minority groups in

Africa, and other regions of the world, have to put up with or fight. When two elephants slug it out over food or mating right, it's the shrubs in the vicinity of the duel that suffers from their crushing blows. Apropos the foregoing aphorism, minorities with a few exceptions in Africa, go through hardship and marginalization in the struggle for power and resources, in competition with dominant groups, in the politics of ethnicity. This is the situation with respect to minority groups in SNNPRS (p. 135).

Chapter seven, "Identities or Resources at Stake? Controversies on National self-determination in Sidama and Wolayta," serves as a major crux in this volume. When resources are scarce ethnic solidarity in the battle for a share – a robust share – of the assets becomes conflictive as in Ethiopia's ethnic federalism. Theoretically, critical to ethnic identification or ethno-nationalism is the assumption of being unique in relations to other ethnic cleavages – a specialness that must be taken seriously in the allocation of power and resources.⁷ Robert Bates has argued that ethnic conflict tends to occur when two or more ethnic groups compete for identical valuable resources in his theory of under/development – as demonstrated in the competition over the group that would control Awassa, the capital of SNNPRS located in Sidama (pp. 148-149). Attempts were made to decouple it from Sidama and thereby deny this group the fruits of modernity. Ethnic conflict, therefore, is seen as a "rational" and even pragmatic strategy in the pursuit for access to valuable resources.⁸

Chapter eight is "Conclusion: The Facts of Ethnic Federalism," which provides an insightful analysis to this volume. Besides, many students of political ethnicity argue that a reductionist argument that places the blame of conflict and political woes in a society on ethnicity or one variable is myopic. They argue that class and the character of the political economy should be taken seriously. Nevertheless, Aalen concludes that any supposition that the institution of an ethnic federalism would mitigate substantially Ethiopian political problems is a sham. In truth, this genre of governance sharpened the ethnic boundaries between ethnic groups (p. 179).⁹ In all, this is a fascinating book and a must read by students of political ethnicity as well as of African studies, who are based in and outside of Africa.

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⁷ E. Ike Udogu, "Ethnicity, the State and the Issue of Nation-building in Nigeria's Fourth Republic," *Scandinavian Journal of Development Alternatives and Area Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (December 1999): 6-7; Nathan Glazer and Patrick D. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1970): xxiii; L. R. Hall, "Introduction," in L. R. Hall (ed.), *Ethnic Autonomy – Comparative Dynamics: The Americas, Europe and the Developing World* (New York: Pergamon Press 1979): 255.

⁸ Robert Bates, "Ethnic Competition and Modernization in Contemporary Africa," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (1974): 459-471.

⁹ See Fredrick Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Bergen, Norway: Universitetsforlaget 1969).

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