

Ethnic Federalism Implementation in Ethiopia: The Paradox

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Abstract

This paper sought at understanding the paradox of ethnic federalism implementation in Ethiopia. The Tigray People Liberation Front took power in 1991 and established the Ethiopian People Democratic Revolutionary Front. As means of conflict resolution and exercising of democracy, the government architected the ethnic federalism system in which the country was divided into 9 administrative constituents and 2 self-administrative cities with a full recognition of self-administration up to the right to secession. However, the practical implementation of the ethnic federalism system proved that ethnic federalism with the right to secession was not the right choice. Contradicting to its establishing goal, it generated and regenerated conflicts from the national to the lower local level of governance. Due to the precarious conflict thousands were died, jailed, displaced and resources were plundered. Due to conflict, more than 1.5 million people were displaced which made Ethiopia the first country followed by Syria.

Keywords: Ethnic federalism; Paradox

Background: Synopsis

Ethiopia is the 12th in the world and the 2nd African populous country [1-3]. The total population of Ethiopia is more than 107 million [4]. It has more than 80 ethnic groups with its own distinct traditions, culture, and language [1,5], and Oromo constituted 34.4%, Amhara (Amara) 27%, Somali (Somalia) 6.2%, Tigray (Tigrinya) 6.1%, Sidama 4%, Gurage 2.5%, Welaita 2.3%, Hadiya 1.7%, Afar (Afar) 1.7%, Gamo 1.5%, Gedeo 1.3%, Silte 1.3%, Kefficho 1.2%, others constituted 8.8% of the total population [6].

Ethiopia has a long history of state formation that can be traced back to the Axumite Empire (first millennium B.C. to 10th century A.D.), the Zagwe empire (1100 A.D.-1270), and the Abyssinian empire (1270 A.D.-1750) which was called Solomonic Dynasty [7]. However, as most of the scholars agreed, the modern history of Ethiopia started during the reign of Emperor Tewodros II (1855-68) [8].

Tewodros II sought at reestablishing a cohesive and strong Ethiopian state [9]; however, he didn't realize his dream of restoring a strong central government in a full scale; although, he introduced the principle that governors and judges must be salaried appointees; established a professional standing army, rather than depending on local lords to provide soldiers for his expeditions. He also intended to reform the church, believing the clergy to be ignorant and immoral [7,8]. After Tewodros II, Ethiopia was ruled by emperors until the last monarch, Haile Selassie I, was overthrown by a military junta in 1974. During this time the long tradition of administration was characterized by a centralized system of administration in which the emperor had absolute power over any major political decision and regional kings who governed their respective provinces under the watch of the Emperor [8].

The downfall of Haile Selassie I, the last Monarch of Solomonic Dynasty, in 1974 paved to the military junta to hold power and set up a communist dictator, and unitary form of government.

Although the military junta brought a fundamental change in the overall form of government of the country (an ideologically driven inclusivist state), the administrative system remained centralized and there was a gross violation of human and democratic rights of the people [9]. As a result, mass uprising and armed struggle were triggered. Ethno-nationalist movements grew enormously; primordial based minor organizations burst forth and finally led to the overthrow of Mengistu's government through a continuous armed struggle.

In 1991, the military junta was overthrown and the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) held power. The government introduced a new constitution and established an ethnic federal system that gave full recognition to ethnic autonomy with a secession option (Ethiopian Constitution). Certain scholars appreciated Ethiopian courage and commitment of implementing ethnic-federalism, having the fact that Ethiopia has more than 80 ethnic groups with a deep diversity. They considered that Ethiopian "ethnic federalism" was innovative, "giving room for thinking differently about ethnicity in the political evolution of Africa" [10], some others also said that constitutional appreciation and recognition of different ethnic groups was the best decision ever decided in Ethiopian political history. According to Selassie addressing of ethnic heterogeneity within a constitutional framework was with a great significance and denying any constitutional space to claims based on ethnic identity was an unwarranted approach [11].

However, still, other plenty of scholars and political activists stated that ethnic federalism was a danger for the coexistence of the country; it was a promotion of disintegration and drifting away than strengthening the cohesiveness of the bonds among ethnic groups. According to Ottaway, political activists believed that ethnic federalism in Ethiopia was a recipe for state disintegration [12]. In spite of these different perspectives, Ethnic Federalism was implemented in Ethiopia since 1991. This paper tried to look at the turnouts of the ethnic federalism implementation in Ethiopia since 1991 focusing on the theme of the ethnic federal system as an integration and conflict resolution instrument.

The Paradox

Throughout its long state formation history, Ethiopia has never introduced any formal form of federalism system of government before 1991. Ethiopia was ruled by Emperors with a kind of monarchical government with a unitary system of government for thousands of years, and from 1974-1991 a dictator government with an absolute unitary system of government ruled the country [11,13,14]. Therefore, it was obvious that the people with a long history of exploitation and oppression demanded a benevolent, genuine and democratic government [15]. The coming of Ethiopia People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) into power in 1991 with a federal form of government was a breakthrough and principally engrossing and away out from the "hangover" of the dictator unitary government.

The new government made a radical restructuring of the unitary state into an ethnic-based federal state with an aim to end suppressive centralized control, redress grievances of different peoples and quelling conflicts in the country [16]. A new constitution which was put into practice in 1995 guarantees human and collective rights, such as rights to develop and use one's own language, culture and history as well as to establish government institutions in one's own territory (Ethiopia Constitution), scholars like Chabal and Daloz stated that Ethiopian "ethnic federalism" was innovative, "giving room for thinking differently about ethnicity in the political evolution of Africa" [10].

Ethiopia's Constitution established a federal republic and embraced the principle of self-determination through democratic rule. Allegedly to further these ends, the Constitution granted all "Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples" in Ethiopia the unconditional right to secede from the nation (Ethiopia Constitution). To Ethiopian minorities and observers in the international community, the country seemed poised for democratic reform that would end decades of oppression [14]. However, in actual execution, the model was in trouble [13], and the country faced a silent crisis [14].

In 1993, Eritrea passed a referendum declaring its independence and seceded [14]. The conflict started to erupt everywhere especially political unrest in the Ogaden, parts of Oromia, Amhara, Gambella, and in urban areas was triggered. To many scholars, this is something of a puzzle after the advent of a new government in 1991 under the aegis of the rural insurgent movement Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that ended the long civil war, promising a solution to the 'national question' in Ethiopia and a diffusion of ethnic and regional tensions [13]. The question is why this paradox happened? This paper tried to look at some of the central causes.

The Secessionist as a Unifier

After waging a sixteen years' protracted war the ethnic-nationalist Tigray People Liberation Front finally managed to conquer Ethiopian state power in 1991, and established the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and initiated the reconstruction of the Ethiopian state along ethnic federal lines [17]. However, the Tigray People Liberation Front establishmentarian goal was to fight against the "Amhara People" who were the core of "Ethiopianism", and to establishing the "Republic of Tigray" (Tigray People Liberation Front Manifesto). So why TPLF established the EPRDF government and decided to govern the country as a whole? Why Ethnic Federalism with the extreme of the right to "unconditional secession" was included within the constitution?

Selassie stated that the interests of ethnic groups can fall into three broad categories [11]. First, ethnic groups may demand to share political power and to be represented in the various institutions of the state. Second, they may seek rights that affirm and preserve their particular identities, cultures, and languages. Finally, some ethnic groups may seek to establish their own independent nation-states. TPLF established the EPRDF government to use it as a legal instrument to build the imagine "Republic of Tigray", with a gradual process. The TPLF-dominated EPRDF intentionally included Article 39 in Ethiopia's 1994 Constitution so that the Tigray region could loot Ethiopia of its resources, use the Ethiopian military to expand the borders of Tigray, and then secede from Ethiopia [14].

According to Aalen, quoted from Young, stated that the TPLF never abandoned the idea of secession completely [17]. It stated that if the EPRDF government is not in the favor of the Tigrayan people, it will resort to the creation of an independent Tigray. According to the TPLF's own manifesto, Tigray plans to secede from Ethiopia. To this end, the TPLF/EPRDF has created a Constitution that will allow them to secede. Thus, TPLF manipulated the political vacuum with rhetoric of "If Tigray secedes, it will leave Ethiopia in chaos". In fact, with no central leadership and stripped of its resources, Ethiopia might cease to exist [14]. They started building a country which dependents on Tigray. The vice chairman of All Amhara People Organization (AAPO), Ali Idris stated:

"EPRDF is a nominal party. The power and all the go-ahead orders are in the hands of the Tigray People's Liberation Front. It is the TPLF that rules the country. According to the manifesto of TPLF, the party's aim is to free Tigray region and its people from the colonial rule of Ethiopia. Keeping this in mind, the so-called EPRDF's motivation for introducing a system of ethnic federalism is not for the sake of Ethiopia and Ethiopians, but for the well-being of the TPLF-group. The system is to disintegrate Ethiopia into pieces, abolishing the long existing unity of the people and retarding the development and growth of Ethiopia. On the other hand, it was to build Tigray to a greater, prosperous and wealthy nation and the Tigray people to a first class people in every aspect in the Horn of Africa" [17], AAPO's written response to questions submitted to the vice chairman Ali Idris, Addis Ababa.

In addition, TPLF wanted to establish Ethnic Federalism with the option of secession to stay in power as they wish. Aalen stated that in order to stay in power TPLF needed to reorganize the state in the line of federalism with an ethnic-based division. Poluha claimed that by introducing ethnically based federalism, the opposition that the EPRDF feared (including the OLF) was disarmed and neutralized. Young stated that ethnic federalism is the best means for the TPLF to retain a leading position in an Ethiopian state where the Tigrayans constitute a minority. This leads to the conclusion that TPLF worked for the disintegration of the country while systematically building the "Republic of Tigray", and preparing for the inevitable secession.

"Integrating" While "Disintegrating"

With the overthrow of the Derg, the current regime has introduced ethnicity-based federalism as a way to deal with secessionist challenges and a means of integration [18]. In 1992 the new Ethiopian government led by the EPRDF/TPLF introduced a new regional map of Ethiopia which proposed 14 killils (killil is an Amharic word meaning 'reserve', 'fenced territory', or 'area that inhibits the view') with "unconditional right to secession" [13]. However, the choice of "ethnic" based federalism and constitutionalization of the right to "secession"

was theoretically illogical and practically suicidal. It couldn't be a solution to the outbreak of conflicts.

In the first place, for many centuries, the Ethiopian state has been home to as many as eighty ethnic communities with different languages, cultures, and religious beliefs. Ethiopian statehood reaches back for millennia and is the shared product of a creative and dynamic process of interaction and development among these communities [11]. The recent Ethiopian census report outlined that there were 4125200 Amharan, 1655000 Oromo, 171100 Somalians, and 220000 Tigrayan lived outside of their region (Ethiopian Statistics Agency). So having the fact that there was no unmixed ethnic group, bloodline classification and demarcation of boundaries was a strategy flunk and a theoretical distortion.

Therefore, this redefinition of Ethiopia along ethnic lines has inherent problems since this new regional division has created conflicts of its own, especially over the demarcation of the territories of the different federal units. As access to land and related resources such as water holes, forest areas and pasture are under pressure for virtually all groups, the advantage to be gained from declaring oneself a member of a group that has a legal identity and can claim rights is obvious. Moreover, the borders did not take into account the geographic and economic-ecological common sense [13].

In the second place, the constitutional recognition of an unconditional right to ethnic groups to secession was showing the way out to ethnic groups. Thus, in 1993 Eritrea legally seceded by a referendum [14]. Following the secession of Eritrea, the country was reorganized into 9 constituent regional government and 2 self-administrative cities (Ethiopian Constitution). However, having more than 80 ethnic groups, giving full right of self-administration with a secession alternative was a decision which compromises on the existence of the country. The country failed under the danger of disintegration, and ethnicity, thereafter, has occupied the center stage of national politics [18].

Ethnocentrism is reconceptualized as a strong sense of ethnic group self-centredness, which involves intergroup expressions of ethnic group preference, superiority, purity, and exploitativeness, and intragroup expressions of ethnic group cohesion and devotion. It is conceptually and empirically distinguished from other concepts, such as outgroup negativity and mere ingroup positivity [19]. Alemante, quoted from Lea Brilmayer, summarized the evility of ethnicity associated with the war in the former Yugoslavia, the killings in Rwanda, the fighting in Chechnya, and many other examples that all too easily come to mind. Nationalism now tends to be associated with barbarism: with genocide, ethnic cleansing, rape, and wanton murder.

Ethiopia's experience was not different. The problem of ethnic diversity and governance on the basis of ethnicity got sever, it further decentred and moved towards the lower levels of administration. As Abbink stated the risk of discrimination of ethnolinguistic minorities by the dominant majority in a Regional State become real, and lead to a new ethnic ranking system. Unlike what happened in the past, any dispute on land or land use between individuals or households now becomes a collective, community issue, and pits communities against each other which led to continuous displacement and plundering of resources, especially the Amharan has fallen under scapegoatism.

The Amhara were chased and killed from every corner of the country; for example, only in an area called West Harerge 10,000-15,000 Amhara were massacred cold-bloodedly [20]. Recently the other people joined the fate of the Amhara. According to USAID

report [21,22], in 2017/8, renewed inter-communal violence in Oromiya and Somali, Oromiya and Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples (SNNP) regions, Benishangul, Addis Ababa has displaced hundreds of thousands of people; overall, conflict has displaced more than 1.5 million people in Ethiopia since September 2017. Ethiopia is now at the top of the world in displacement associated with conflict. The causes of all these conflicts and the aftermath displacement can be multifaceted but the ethnic federalism and the secessionist option for ethnic groups, the way it was implemented can take the lion share.

Recognizing One while Denouncing the Other

The other central theme of ethnic federalism was giving room and recognition for ethnic groups. However, as Aregawi Berhe clearly listed down all the participant of the conference on July 1-5, 1991 so as to establish the Transitional Government, sadly there was no any group that represented the Amhara people who were the "auspex" of Ethiopian politics, and "Ethiopianism" for centuries.

The articulation of a strategy of "ethnic liberation" and the impetus for the search for a new identity for the Ethiopian state came chiefly, if not exclusively, from two ethnic-regional movements: the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Both of these movements purported to speak on behalf of their respective ethnic communities, and in each case, their resentment came from their perception that the Ethiopian state had historically been dominated by the Amhara, the country's second major ethnic group [11]. Therefore, using their "past victim" mentality, the TPLF and OLF mobilized their followers to rid themselves of ethnic oppression and to achieve self-determination, while defaming and denouncing the "Amhara". For TPLF and OLF Federalism is then not only a way to power, but also a means to overcome the Amhara hegemony and provide a structure in which the EPRDF could govern. However, this was a fatal mistake since Amahara was the core of Ethiopian politics and can be used as "unifying factor" by itself, and "Amharan Hegemony" was a simply a hasty generalization.

Woefully, Tigray People Liberation Front dominated government targeted the Amhara as their main enemies, spread animosity and hate, wrongly accusing them of being rulers, oppressors and exploiters [20], demarcated the historical lands of Amhara to different regions such as Metekel to Benishangul Gumuz, Tigray has successfully annexed fertile lands from the neighboring regions of Wollo and Gondar of Amhara [14]. The government deliberately scrapped the non-tribal provinces and replacing them with gerrymandered regions, and drastically changed the territorial makeup of the country. The original people, the Amhara, were displaced forcefully and exterminatide systematically (Amhara Professionals Union, February 13, 2017). The case of Welkait and Raya was a clear demonstration. Wolkayit and Raya were a territory primarily dominated by Amharan and administered under Gondar and Wollo administration respectively.

This created irredentism nostalgia on the mind of every Amhara, and then, they firmly started the struggle for the inclusion of the "lost lands". These territorial claim and question of identity became a zone of contention and source of continuous conflict in today's Ethiopian Politics. The majority of conflicts now dubbed 'ethnic' in Ethiopia are about boundaries between territorialize ethnic groups. Fights about identity are being waged in order to establish the borders of districts and zones, and the 'identity' professed by local people is the deciding element [13].

While writing this paper, the Raya people flooded the “Alamata”, “Kobo” streets, blowing a slogan of asking for identity recognition...”Raya has never been Tigray”, “Raya is part of Amhar”. Tigray People Liberation Front military tried to quell down the demonstration by shouting down innocent civilians including children. The tension between Amhara and Tigray people was escalated with a war of propaganda and one another incrimination (Press Release of Amhara Region communication Office, Oct 23, 2018 and Tigray Region Communication Office, Oct 13, 2018). There was immense military training in regions which seemed a “preparation” for a civil war.

Riding in the Middle

The masters of Ethnic Federalism, Tigray People Liberation Front, stated that Ethnic federalism was introduced to maintain the integration of the country; however, ethnic federalism promoted ethnicity and stringent ethnicization dominated the politics of the country and corrupted the minds of the people. It was used by the government as a favourite instrument of “divide and rule”. Divide-and-rule benefited for the minority, TPLF, to rule the country [13]. When they [the EPRDF] came to power, the Derg and the Amhara were the declared enemies. They declared the right to self-determination in order to achieve popular support in the regions. This is a sort of “divide and rule”, a method of a minority governing a majority. In a democracy, this was impossible [17] Interview Lidetu Ayalew, Secretary General EDP, Addis Ababa June 2000.

The TPLF was politically weak when it came to power because it represented less than six percent of the population. A way of securing its position was to transform the country into ethnically defined regional states and create ethnically defined parties under its control [23]. Ethiopian regime led by the EPRDF, that emanated from the ethnic-regional movement, has not foreseen the drawbacks of a system based on ethno linguistically defined regions and a strict ‘ethnicization’ policy. However, Yacob Cheka Hidoto [16], cited from Eriksen: stated that political entrepreneurs manipulate kinship, cultural symbols, and other ethnic differences to mobilize people for political gain. The role of ‘ethnic middlemen’ became vital.

What happened in Ethiopia for the last 28 years was worse. The government constructed “sub-ethnic identities” like “oppressor and oppressed”, “favored and disfavored”, and widened the crack among ethnic groups. Terms like “chauvinism”, “narrow-minded”, “rent seeker”, etc. became the fashion of the government; all government officials from the higher federal level to the lower kebele level chanted these words, no matter what the reality uttered. “Chauvinism” was entitled mostly with the Amhara, and “narrow-minded” with Oromos, in a slight extent with Tigrians. If you are Amhara and deviated from the government in any matter, you will be registered under the vocabulary of “chauvinist”, if you are Oromo, you will be listed under “narrow-minded”. The political situation of the country went worse and worse. Government officials daily chant about prevention of the so-called “rent seeking”, but corruption became a formal law enforcement machinery (Ethiopia Human Right Commission). The same thing applies to “chauvinist and narrow-minded”, despite they were the center and machinery of “chauvinism and myopism”, they spoke aloud as they were struggling against the alleged “chauvinist and narrow-minded”.

The so-called “chauvinist and narrow-minded” group stratification and identification became the daily business of the politics of the

country, and on the other pole, the so-called past “disfavored or oppressed” ethnic groups supported by the government to stand against the so-called “favorite or oppressor” ethnic groups, especially the Amharan became a scapegoat in all parts of the country. Within single country first second and third citizens stratification was institutionalized and implemented. The case of the 40, 40 and 20 policy of Dire Dawa, self-administered city, was a persuasive example. This policy clearly stated that If you are Amhara no matter whether you born and grow up in Dire Dawa, you will be placed second strata. If you speak against this mistreatment, you will be written under the blacklist of “chauvinist”.

The alleged “chauvinists and narrow minds” were always under the surveillance of government cadres and security agencies. They hunted down and with any means of pretext, they will be thrown to jail; tortured and economically disfavored, and TPLF and its patronage freely swam in the middle for the last 28 years.

Reconciliation Turnout to Conflict

Ethiopia has a long history of conflict resolution. The traditional conflict resolution practice especially in Amhara, Oromo, Guraghe, was effective and efficient. However, the coming into power of Tigray People Liberation Front corrupted the genuine practice by killing community figures or replaced by cadres and networked political patrons.

Meles Zenawi, the prime minister of EPRDF and chairman of TPLF, claimed that all they were trying to do was to stop the war and to prevent a new one erupting. He also tried to legitimize the introduction of ethnic federalism by claiming that it was the only way of democratically restructuring the country, enhancing the political participation of the Ethiopian population and giving ethnic-regional rights to the previously oppressed peoples or nationalities. The argument is based on the assumption that democracy can only be established through ethnicity, through regionally defined ethnic rights [17], which was so faulty. Rather, the ethnic diversity of the country was like a fertile ground to be exploited by the government, and it was exploited exhaustively, which further created a smooth road for the coming of many ethnolinguistic groups in the political arena with a “past victim syndrome”, and eager to promote their own unique interest in a way of “revisionism of the status quo”.

The past “victim mentality” and the “revisionism ambition” deconstructed the long lasted status quo of “living with tolerance”, dragged the country into a vicious circle of Ethnic based conflicts, and clashes from the lower local level to the higher national level. It built mistrust and distrust among the different Ethnic groups who lived for centuries together with a “colorful tolerance”. In times of disagreement between ethnic groups, the appeal to the idea of an overall citizenship may prevent the convict from escalating into open ethnic fighting. The maintenance of the idea of an overall citizenship is however dependent on the existence of a state perceived to be neutral [24-27]. However, in Ethiopia, there was no overall citizenship and the government was not neutral. The shared and superordinate values of the country dramatically eroded, and the issue of self-determination for national groups became one of the major conflict line in the country.

The situation went worse, especially at the local level. According to Merara, ethnic federalism exacerbated and regenerated conflicts especially at the local level [28]. Almost all ethnic groups cultivated ethnic nationality than state nationality, within the country there was a development of secession, which further led to competition for land,

which regenerated to boundary conflict. Lovise Aalen stated that Ethiopia's policy of ethnic regionalization led to the emergence of inter-regional boundary conflicts [17,29,30]. Conflicts, horizontally among ethnic groups, and vertical clashes with the government securities were prevalent [31].

The country was severely beaten by a frequent wave of conflicts. Recently ACAPS (2017) categorized Ethiopia under the group of Iraq, Nigeria, Palestine, Sudan, and Syria and stated that conflict was severed. The prospects and destiny of the country are at crossroad, and its future existence was unpredictable [32-34]. ACAPS (2017) indicated that violence and insecurity will likely to deteriorate in Ethiopia, like what were happened and happening in Afghanistan, DRC, Libya, Mali, Somalia, and Syria. The political situation of the country worsens from time to time.

Conclusion

Even though Ethiopia implemented Ethnic Federalism for the last 28 years, it remains entangled in ethnic strife and bloody conflicts which lead to conclude that the implementation of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia is problematic and ineffective that puts a big challenge on the nation's unity in diversity. It will be a "liability" in Ethiopia, rather than being an "asset", since it generate and regenerate conflicts all over the country.

The experiment of Ethnic Federalism was completely failed especially as a means of quelling of ethnic-based conflicts and cheering democracy to the people. Rather the curse of ethnic federalism with its implementation failure drove the country to the mid of the ocean without a tideland. Ethiopia is now like a boat slowly sinking down which led to a wave of insecurity and instability for the Horn of Africa in particular and the whole Africa and world in general.

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