



Ethiopia: the challenge of many nationalities

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Ethiopia is going through an arduous transition to democracy at the same time as it is attempting to put in place a kind of “ethnic federalism” that affords all regions and groups a measure of autonomy and real power.

Between 1976 and 1990 the country was nearly torn apart. The ruling junta of Col. Mengistu fought a series of regional wars against:

- the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front in Eritrea;
- the Tigray Liberation Front in the Tigray region;
- the Oromo Liberation Front in the Eastern Harargay and Wolega regions;
- the Afar Liberation Front in the Afar region;
- and the Western Somali and Ogaden Liberation Movements in the Ogaden region.

In May 1991 the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Forces overthrew the dictatorship. Eritrea became independent (but only signed a peace treaty with Ethiopia in 2000) and the new Ethiopian government started down the road to a federal system based on ethnic regions.

The road to a new constitution

Its first step was to adopt a “Transitional Period Charter”, which was drafted by representatives of different “liberation movements”, ethnic groups, and prominent individuals.

This charter established a transitional period government that was composed of a Council of Representatives and Council of Ministers. The Council of Representatives was made up of the representatives of national (ethnic) liberation movements, other political

organizations and prominent individuals. It exercised legislative and supervisory functions.

In addition to reorganising the central government, the Charter contained two important measures. It provided for the promulgation of a law that would establish local and regional councils for local administrative purposes, defined on the basis of nationality, and it stated that the Council of Representatives would form the Constitutional Commission to draw up a draft constitution.

Recognizing “nationalities”

Fourteen “National/Regional Self-Governments” were established and sixty-five ethnic communities living in these regions were identified. Among the identified ethnic communities, forty-eight were entitled to establish their own self-governments at the Woreda—or district—level, while the remaining seventeen were considered minority nationalities and were only guaranteed “appropriate representation” in Woreda Councils.

The “Self-Governments” of neighbouring “nations, nationalities and peoples” were also authorised to enter into agreements to establish jointly a larger “Regional Self-Government” and set up other necessary intermediate units of self-government between the Woreda and the Regional levels. In the southern part of the country, five regions entered into just such an arrangement. They formed a single Southern Regional Self-Government wherein each ethno-linguistic community would retain its own local self-government and have representation at the Regional level.

As a result, the number of “National/Regional Self-Governments” decreased from fourteen to nine.

Legally, the Councils of the Regional Governments were not only accountable to the people of the regions that elected them but were also made responsible to the Council of Representatives of the Central Government. They were unable to carry out much of their allocated functions without the financial support of the Central Government.

The Self-Governments were vested powers within their geographic areas in all matters that were not expressly given to the Central Government.

Matters under the jurisdiction of the Central Government included defence, foreign affairs, fiscal and economic policy, citizenship, declaration of states of emergency and major communication networks.

The Self-Governments, on the other hand, were accorded broad power in such matters as language, culture, education, health, police and security, and social and economic development activities. They were also able to establish their own courts with jurisdiction to decide any dispute in their respective regions with the exception of those assigned to the courts of the Central Government.

After a four-year transitional period, the organization of state power on the basis of territorially based “ethnic communities” was reinforced and elevated to constitutional status.

Ethnic identities in constitutional form

The new federal constitution set up a two-chamber parliament at the federal level and one-chamber parliaments known as State Councils at the constituent-unit level. The federal parliament is composed of the House of Peoples’ Representatives and the House of Federation. The House of Peoples’

Representatives is the federal legislature. The House of Federation, which is “composed of representatives of nations, nationalities and peoples”, is the other federal representative assembly with specific powers, including the ultimate power “to interpret the constitution” and “to decide on issues relating to the rights of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples to self-determination, including the right to secession.”

The nine National/Regional self-governments, which were established during the transitional period, are incorporated into the new constitution and renamed as Regions that make up the Ethiopian Federation.

The federal constitution requires every member state to grant adequate power to local governments in order to encourage grassroots participation in political life. Plus it specifically obliges both the federal and member states to respect and ensure the rights of “nations, nationalities and peoples”.

Indeed, the Ethiopian constitution describes ethnic communities as being the essential constituent units of the federation. It starts out with the term “We, the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia...ratified the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia.” It defines these terms to mean “a group of people who have or share a large measure of common culture, or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, and who predominantly inhabit an identifiable contiguous territory.”

The Ethiopian federal political system created by this constitution is based upon the recognition of the right of ethnic communities to self-determination. This right has three component and interrelated aspects:

- the preservation and promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity;
- the right of every ethnic community to political autonomy and participation in the federal decision-making process;
- and the right to secession.

The linguistic and cultural diversity aspect of the right of self-determination comprises the right of every ethnic community to use and develop its language, to express and promote its culture, and to preserve its history.

The autonomy and participation aspect of the right of self-determination entitles every ethnic community to self-government and to proportional representation in regional and federal government. This aspect of self-determination ensures the devolution of state power to ethno-territorial communities and is designed to make it difficult for all power to be concentrated in a small group. It is also aimed at developing a common identity and unity among ethnic communities.

The right to secession is the most complex and highly controversial part of the right of self-determination under the Ethiopian constitution. Some continue to argue vigorously against it on the ground that such a right is the exclusive right of nations under colonial domination and that its recognition could lead the country to fragmentation. Others hold that the constitutional recognition of the right to secession not only guarantees respect for

the rights of “nations, nationalities and peoples” but is also an affirmation of the “consensual” character of the federal union.

Ethiopia’s political history has proved that the unity of its many peoples can only be achieved through their mutual consent to live together to pursue their common interests. A unity that is based on the denial of the right of self-determination could not be maintained for long by coercion. Instead of bringing about real and viable unity, it would breed ethnic discontent, attempts at secession, and, ultimately, civil wars.

Ethiopia’s rejection of a resort to violence in order to secure the unity of its peoples and its attempts to bring about consensual unity by devolving political power to its constituent people are not just bold but courageous attempts to tame the centrifugal forces engulfing the country. 6

History

Prior to the 1880s, what today is regarded as the territory of Ethiopia was inhabited by various peoples (cultural communities) whose respective indigenous political structures took such forms as fiefdoms, kingdoms, and egalitarian structures.

Following the imperial intrusion into the horn of Africa in the closing years of the 19th century, Emperor Menelik of the Amhara expanded the kingdom of Shawa, which was one of the loosely associated kingdoms of the Abyssinian empire. As a result of the successful conquests and expansions, the modern Ethiopian state was created and emerged as a unitary and centralized state

One major effect of the empire-building process was peoples’ dispossession from their land in the conquered regions. The new rulers took three quarters of the land, converting the former proprietors into tenants. The latter provided the labour that enriched the absentee landlords in Addis Ababa. This led to conflicts and antagonism between the tenants and the soldier-settlers in most of the south of the Empire.

The other serious consequence of the empire-building process was the imposition of the Amhara culture, language and religion, and the suppression of all others. Amharic was declared the national language of Ethiopia. No languages other than Amharic were allowed in schools, the press and government, and no religious festivities other than those sanctioned by the state were to be observed.

The demands of the various ethnic communities of Ethiopia for self-determination were brought to the forefront in the wake of the 1974 popular uprising that deposed the Emperor from his throne and enabled the military junta to come to power.

The junta could neither address nor handle the issue of self-governance. Rather, it exacerbated the problems by its persistent stubbornness, its refusal to compromise and its horrendous use of violence to curb such demands. Armed conflicts, civil strife, famine and economic deterioration devastated the country.