



Federalism and the Management of Diversity in Ethiopia

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Ethiopia is widely known for having successfully escaped western colonial domination. Over the last three decades, this ancient African state has gone through a wave of revolutionary changes leading to the demise of both the imperial era and the military regime of 1974 to 1991. Following the collapse of the centralized unitary era in May 1991, the country was restructured as federal, constituted by nine regional states and two autonomous cities, with a significant degree of commitment to accommodate ethno-linguistic diversity and related sub-national interests. The transition from a centralized unitary state to the current federal arrangement was brought about by liberation movements represented by ethno-linguistic groups in different parts of the country who forcefully dismantled and then rebuilt the nation's structure. These liberation movements dominated the process of restructuring the state into a federation.

But the "national question" has remained one of the major political challenges in Ethiopia for more than half a century. The excessive concentration of power and resources at the centre and the insistence upon ethnic homogenization resulted in a series of historical grievances on the part of the different ethno-linguistic groups and cultural communities.

For a long period Ethiopia was incorrectly portrayed as a mono-cultural society and unified unitary state. In fact, Ethiopia has more than 80 ethno-linguistic communities inhabiting different parts of the country. None of these groups constitutes a majority. Previously, the central government used its institutions to assimilate diverse groups and communities into the culture and values of the ruling class. Political power and resources were largely distributed to members of the ruling class and specific ethnic groups or communities. The federal system is now meant to address these historical shortcomings and respond to the aspirations of the country's different ethno-linguistic groups.

Fortunately, federalism has become a point of national consensus; virtually all sides agree that the federal option is the only viable and reasonable alternative for Ethiopia. This consensus has come as a result of the change in attitudes toward the practical results of the system. In the initial stages, there was anxiety among some as to the possible consequences of the reforms introduced to address the grievances of the different ethnic groups. Now, it seems clear that the country will not fracture because of the increased freedoms of different ethnic groups to express their sub-national identities, cultures, and values. Meanwhile, differences of perspectives still exist on several issues such as the protection of minorities at both the regional and federal orders and the devolution of power and resources to the states.

A major concern relates to the interests and prospects of minorities in each of the nine federated regional states of the federation and is likely to remain a source of tension for some time. Given the inexperience of the state functionaries at the local order and the absence of effective democratic institutions and civil society in the country, certain measures are incumbent on the federal authorities to ensure uniform implementation of the rights enshrined in the constitution. On the other hand, the legitimate interests of the different ethnic groups to administer their localities need be respected as long as democratic rules and principles prevail. The challenge is in striking a reasonable balance between these competing interests.

Another topic of debate relates to the mechanism for protecting the interests of the different ethnic groups and communities at the federal order. Ethiopian federalism seeks to accommodate the interests of the different ethnic groups at the centre. Contrary to common practice, the second federal house, otherwise known as the House of Federation, does not take part in the legislative process. Thus, the smaller minorities are left at a disadvantage. The absence of pluralistic political participation in the House amounts to denying it of a vital resource to promote the interests of the peoples of the country. Consequently, some call for direct election of the members of the House as opposed to the current practice of state organs choosing the House delegates.

The issue of decentralization of power and resources to the regional states has attracted considerable attention. The federal Constitution grants considerable autonomy to the regions. Perhaps the most controversial is the right granted to the nationalities to secede. However, since Ethiopia is currently under the rule of one dominant party, there is some scepticism as to the freedom of state government actors in safeguarding the autonomy and interests of their constituencies within the frame of the Constitution. Some argue that despite the constitutional autonomy of the regional states, the political reality simply continues the traditional control by the centre. The existing financial situation of the states also shows an over-dependency on federal subsidies – due less to the Constitution itself and more to party structures. It has been argued that the prevalent political culture has not been in favour of power sharing and participation. This means that a key challenge is for the federal system to inculcate and promote the growth of participatory and democratic political culture in the country. Currently, there is clear and broad interest in protecting the autonomy of the states from unnecessary control and undue interference from the centre.

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Ethiopian society also exhibits some important unifying factors and obvious potentialities for nation building. The preamble of the Ethiopian federal Constitution refers to the existence of “common interests and the emergence of a common outlook” resulting from centuries-long interactions among the ethnic groups and cultural and religious communities. This seems to be supported by some historical facts. For example, the history of all Ethiopians in defending the sovereignty of the country against colonial aggression at the famous Battle of Adawa in 1896 and other similar cases are cherished and respected symbols of a common legacy. Despite the considerable differences between the various ethno-linguistic groups, the two main religions – Orthodox Christianity (50 percent of the population) and Islam (40 percent of the population) – have served as unifying factors cutting across ethno-linguistic boundaries.

In the globalizing world, national strategies are needed for national survival. Many believe there can be no better option than federal democracy for countries like Ethiopia, which seek to promote national unity without undermining the values and interests of its constituent units. Such legacies and common interests in Ethiopia serve as a basis for its federal system. Indeed, Ethiopia’s federal arrangement could be a source of inspiration for others given its geo-political and historical importance and population.