

Can Diversity be Accommodated?

The Case of Ethiopia

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1. Introduction

After the demise of the military regime in 1991, the new Ethiopian leaders of the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) declared their commitment to a clean break with the past and the establishment of a new society based on equality, rule of law, and the right for self determination.

The recognition of Ethiopian ethnic diversity became the central principle of the new regime's policy. And this is immediately reflected in the Transitional Period Charter of 1991 and in subsequent proclamations. Once the Charter paved the way for decentralization, Ethiopia became a federal state in 1995. The Federal Constitution makes this quite explicit by establishing a multicultural federation with a democratic state structure, to accommodate the diversity of ethnic groups of the country.

Therefore, the objective of this paper is to describe the accommodation of diversity in the Ethiopian federal system and analyse its implication for the future. The first part briefly discusses the formation of the modern Ethiopian state and how this contributed to the historical evolvement of the federal system in Ethiopia. The salient features of the Ethiopian federal system will be discussed in the second part. After analysing the existing Ethiopian federal

system, I have tried to indicate some points that may be useful in consolidating the success of the Ethiopian federal experiment.

2. The Formation of Modern Ethiopian State and its Contradictory Interpretations

2.1 The Formation of Modern Ethiopian State

Every federation is the result of its own unique experience. It is indispensable for a federal system to reflect this historical and context if it is to be successful

Though Ethiopia has a long history of statehood, present-day Ethiopia is mainly the result of the incorporation process of Emperor Menelik, who ruled from 1889 to 1913. As Bahru notes “the creation of modern Ethiopia was started by Tewdros, incorporated by Yohanis, consolidated by Menelik and completed by Haile Sellassie” (Bahru, 1991).

The “reunification”, “expansion” or “colonization”, depending on interpretation, of Menelik brought together different ethnic groups that had their own identity, culture, and language. With the creation of a modern empire, we see the domination of Amharic culture over the newly incorporated ethnic groups. In the eyes of Clapham, “the expansion was accompanied by an assumption of Amhara supremacy and a policy of Amharisation” (Clapham, 1974).

Emperor Haile Sellassie (1916-30 as regent and 1930-74 as emperor) subsequently centralized all power. The 1931 Constitution and the 1955 revised Constitution were important instruments to reduce the power of regional lords and consolidate his personal rule.

In the name of “Ethiopian Unity”, there was an attempt to suppress all non-Amhara identities. Political domination was aggravated by cultural domination and economic exploitation. To be within the state structure, all non-Amhara people were expected to speak Amharic and adopt the culture and religion of the ruling class (Abebe, 1994). This discriminatory policy resulted in an uneven representation of various ethnic groups in central government. The condition for southern Ethiopians was worse. Therefore,

the formation of the modern Ethiopian empire is characterized by political exclusion, economic exploitation, and cultural domination. Because of the suppression of various ethnic groups, Ethiopia was called “the prison house of nations and nationalities.”

2.2 Contending Views on Ethiopian History

The way the Ethiopian empire was created, and the way it evolved, made it easy for contending interpretations of Ethiopian history. According to Merara those who see little or no injustice in the actions of the empire builders consider the empire building process as reunification. The expansion thesis, on the other hand, recognizes the injustices done during the process of expansion and seeks a solution within a democratic and unified Ethiopia. Lastly, there are those who advocate a colonial thesis in interpreting the creation of empire, and argue for a separatist political agenda (Merara, 2006).

Having these contending views, different political movements, either regional or ethnic, started to violently resist the imperial and military regimes. They demanded the right to self-determination for nations and nationalities, along with other rights.

The military junta or Derg that seized power in 1974 ignored the principle of self-determination, and the various political movements continued their armed struggle until 1991.

In 1991, a new government led by the EPRDF replaced the Derg. In order to address the national questions of Ethiopia, a democratic federal system was set up in 1995. The attempt was to accommodate ethnic diversity within a new federal Ethiopia based on the principle of political, economic, and social equality. As it was seen, the view of the EPRDF government could be considered as a compromise between a unitary government, which cannot easily accommodate diversity, and disintegration of the country into its constituent ethnic regions.

2.3 Diversity as a Source of Sovereignty

There are more than eighty ethnic groups in Ethiopia. For a multicultural country like Ethiopia, therefore, where multiple ethnic

groups want to keep their language, culture, and identity, federalism is often the best available form of government. Federalism in Ethiopia is a power sharing arrangement that seeks to create stability by constitutionally dividing political power among various ethnic groups, allowing different ethnic groups to create a strong federal state without losing their identity or compromising their interests.

Looking to the past and analysing the current realities of Ethiopia, it can be argued that there is no alternative to a federal system of some sort for Ethiopia, if it is to have a future as a multi-ethnic state with democratic institutions. As the history of Ethiopia shows, the Ethiopian federal experience in many ways is the result of the quest of the people for self-determination.

3. The Salient Features of the Ethiopian Federal Arrangement

The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia has been in place since August 1995, formally introducing a federal form of government. The Constitution declares the full and free exercise of self-determination. The aim of this, according to the preamble of the Constitution, is to show that “our destiny can be best served by rectifying historically unjust relationships”.

From this one can understand that the Constitution has acknowledged past oppression and exploitation of ethnic groups. Now, the recognition of these groups forms the basis for building a federal and democratic state. The Constitution states that “all sovereign power resides in the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia”. It further assures that even the Constitution itself is “an expression of their sovereignty”. Moreover, their sovereignty is expressed through their democratically elected representatives. Therefore, in the Ethiopian federal system, sovereignty lies with the constituent ethnic groups themselves.

Importantly, if the federal government abuses the rights of the various ethnic groups, they are entitled to reassert their powers of sovereignty in the form of “an unconditional right to self determination, including the right to secession” (Article 39). Consent of each

nation, nationality, and people, therefore, lies at the heart of the Ethiopian federal system.

The other important feature of Ethiopian federalism is the prominent role given to the principle of multiculturalism. As federalism aims to accommodate diversity, Ethiopia, as a multiethnic society, requires a multicultural federation. The preamble of the Constitution clearly refers to the long history of living together and “with rich and proud cultural legacies in territories long inhabited”. Within the federal structure, the different multicultural elements are reflected in the state members. The nine states are organized based on settlement patterns, language, identity, and consent. Accordingly, the nine states are Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somalia, Benshangul Gumuz, Gambella, Harari, and the SNNPR (Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region).

Ethiopian federalism does not limit the number of the states. Every nation, nationality, and people has the right to establish, at any time, its own state. Therefore, the number of the federal units could be increased or decreased based on the consent of ethnic groups, making it a unique feature of Ethiopian federalism.

The preamble of the Constitution stipulates that “We, the Nations, Nationalities and peoples of the Ethiopia strongly committed, to building a *political community* . . . and advancing our economic and social development . . . to live as *one economic community* is necessary in order to create sustainable and mutually supportive conditions for ensuring respect for our rights and freedoms and for the collective promotion of our interests” (italics added).

This shows the emphasis on creating a cooperative federalism in Ethiopia. A common vision is indispensable for a multiethnic country. It is impossible to build a common political and economic community without cooperation. Though federalism values autonomy, it cannot function without solidarity. Indeed, while each order of government is autonomous, it is not so that they may ignore each other. Rather, it is so that each, with its own characteristics and capitalizing fully on its potential, can better help others. All the governments of federation are interdependent and must work together for their citizens, over and above their political,

regional or other differences. The ideal of federalism is the very opposite of internal separatism; it is genuine solidarity.

In a federal system power is divided or shared between the centre and states, each possessing powers circumscribed by the Constitution. In this regard, the Ethiopian Constitution guarantees that the federal government and the states shall have legislative, executive, and judicial powers (Article 50(2)). It further makes it clear that their powers are constitutionally defined and that they shall respect their powers (Article 50(2)). However, if necessary, delegation of power is possible from the centre to the regions. In this connection the Federal Government formulates and implements overall economic, social, and developmental policies. In national matters that concern the whole country, powers are given to the Federal Government. The regional states have “all powers not given expressly to the Federal Government alone, or concurrently to the Federal Government and the states” (Article 52(1)). All states have executive, legislative, and judiciary powers in all matters that concern their local affairs.

Another feature to be mentioned is the principle of linguistic-pluralism. The Constitution makes Amharic the working language of the federal government (Article 5(2)), but also gives the member states the right to determine their respective working languages. Moreover, “every nation, nationality and people has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language” (Article 39(2)).

3.1 Unity in Diversity

The features of Ethiopian federalism mentioned earlier have as their primary objective to promote unity in diversity. According to Assefa, the Ethiopian federal system, because of the fragile situation the country was in, threatened by various national liberation movements, the commitment to right of self-determination and the establishment of regional governments based on mainly on ethno-linguistic line is a bold measure that ensured the survival of the Ethiopian state (Assefa, 2006). In general, accommodating the diverse interests and identity of ethnic groups by providing the right for self-determination is the overriding principle and the most remarkable feature of the Ethiopian federal system.

4. Points to be Considered in the Ethiopian Federal System

The Ethiopian federal system, as any other federation, is an ongoing experiment. In the process of building a federal and democratic state, which is a complete break from the two previous dictatorial regimes, there are some challenges encountered by the system. These may be explained as “institutional efficiency gap”. In other words, there is a need for efficient federal and democratic institutions to effectively and continually consolidate the success of the federal system in a complex society such as that of Ethiopia. This institutional efficiency gap manifests itself in the following ways: lack of good governance and strong democratic institutions; lack of institutions that deal with intergovernmental relations; and lack of civil society organizations to produce ongoing research on the federal system. Each will be discussed in turn.

4.1 *Lack of Good Governance and Strong Democratic Institutions*

When one discusses the development of democratic institutions, it is important to keep in mind the government’s effort to establish new democratic institutions for the first time in Ethiopia’s history. The resulting lack of efficiency in the existing institutions, or even absence of strong democratic institutions, has negatively affected the performance of the federal system in its struggle to accommodate diversity.

Without democracy, genuine federalism is impossible. Federalism, like democracy, promotes and accommodates pluralism. The Ethiopian Constitution establishes a parliamentary democratic state with other democratic institutions. In Ethiopia, because of the inefficiency of democratic institutions, there have been conflicts, mainly from a lack of good governance. Even though conflicts among ethnic groups are preventable using peaceful mechanisms, we have seen conflicts, particularly in Gambella. This is because “the political actors have failed to strike a political bargain and articulate legitimate regional interests. Instead, they have sougheed to capture fragments of the regional state and its institutions” (Derje, 2006).

Assefa raises a further limitation which he describes as “local tyranny” (Assefa, 2006). Assefa argues that “local tyranny” exists when minority ethnic groups are marginalized economically and politically. Democracy, as well known, is the rule of the majority by respecting the rights of the minority. Hence, a higher prevalence of good governance and consolidation of democratic institutions could be solutions to this local tyranny. The conflicts that we have witnessed in this regard are related to the lack of good governance and democratic culture and personality which could jeopardize the gains of the Ethiopian federal system. Though this is unfortunate, it is also fortunate to know that the Ethiopian government has recognized the existence of this governance shortfall as a major political problem to be addressed immediately.

4.2 Lack of Conflict Managing Institutions

Conflicts are preventable and manageable; if they happen, they can also be resolved and transformed. But this requires an efficient set of institutions to prevent, manage, and transform conflicts into mutually beneficial experiences. In the last decade, the large number of conflicts coincided with a lack of institutions to prevent, manage, and transform those conflicts. Even in the SNNPR where many conflicts arise, there was no successful mechanism to use the existing traditional mediation systems. Therefore, establishing effective conflict resolution institutions is indispensable for the success and further strengthening of the federal system of Ethiopia. In this way, federalism can be used as a learning process of negotiation and conflict resolution.

4.3 Intergovernmental Relations

Though the Ethiopian federal system has the feature of cooperative federalism, there is an institutional lacuna for intergovernmental cooperation between the centre and the states (Assefa, 2006). Formal mechanisms of intergovernmental relations are important means of cooperation and solidarity between the centre and the federal units. Recently the government has established Department

of Intergovernmental Relations in the Ministry of Federal Affairs, a positive and timely decision.

Moreover, cooperation, not just between the centre and the federating units, but among constituent units, is crucial for building a common political and economic community. Once again, the Ethiopian Constitution is silent about formal mechanisms for horizontal relations among the states. Despite this, the House of Federation, the Upper House of Parliament, organizes regional consultations annually in which all the nine states share their experiences. This consultation, however, still requires an institutional framework.

4.4 Lack of Research Institutions

Elazar reminds us that federalism is not accepted without opposition (Elazar, 1987). Some hail Ethiopian federalism as the answer to the national question and the key to accommodating diversity. Others, however, argue that it is escalating inter-ethnic conflict and may lead to disintegration, and so reject ethnic federalism. In response, the country needs an institution to promote a healthy and informed debate and dialogue on the advantages and disadvantages of the federal system. Unfortunately, such institutions do not exist at the moment. As a country developing a new system of federalism, it needs independent research institutions that generate scientific ideas for policy makers and creates awareness within the country. As a young federal system requiring consolidation, it is of great importance that these institutions transcend partisan politics.

5. Conclusion

The Ethiopian federal system is the result of the struggle of oppressed ethnic groups for the right to self-determination. The federal system allows the accommodation of diversity within a democratic system. For a multiethnic country like Ethiopia, the existing federal system is a source of peace and stability, ensuring political and economic participation of all ethnic groups. Moreover, by valuing autonomy and solidarity, such a system will help to build a common political and economic community.

However, the Ethiopian federal experience is far from perfect, like any federal system in the world. It must be improved, but also consolidated. Since the main objective of the Ethiopian federal arrangement is to bring peace and development by preventing conflicts, it is important to strengthen democratic institution at all levels of government. In addition, governance structures that ensure the participation of the public are the appropriate instrument to create a democratic culture that promotes pluralism and tolerance. It is also crucial to establish and strengthen conflict prevention management and resolution institutions at the federal, regional, and local levels.

A strong institution that deals with relations among states and between the centre and states is another indispensable mechanism to promote genuine solidarity. In this regard, the Intergovernmental Relations Department of the Ministry of Federal Affairs needs to build its capacity to play a significant role.

At such a stage of constant flux, Ethiopia requires an equally dynamic federal system to address the various challenges it faces. This in turn requires an informed and healthy dialogue among all stakeholders on how to consolidate the federal system to enable it to accommodate diversity in such a complex country.

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