



Ethiopia: Along the Path of Democratic Federalism

**Honourable Mr. Kassa Tekelebirhan, Speaker of
the House of Federation of the Federal Democratic
Republic of Ethiopia**

September 2014

Ladies and Gentlemen, let me begin by thanking the Forum of Federations for taking the initiative of organizing such a platform which gives me the opportunity to share with you the Experience of Ethiopia in practicing multicultural democratic federalism.

My talk this evening will mainly focus on the path that Ethiopia took to come out of intractable conflict, backwardness and abject poverty and take the path of sustainable development by designing and implementing a workable system of governance and well-matched policies and strategies.

Ethiopia has always been and still is a nation of multifaceted diversities. Being the cradle of humanity, the country is a home for ancient civilizations such as Damat, Axum and Zagwe. These great civilizations, as evidenced by living obelisks and rock-hewn buildings, ruins of temples and other archeological findings, are well-known for their fascinating monuments, architectural artifacts, unique scripts and metal tools. The relics that our ancestors have left made the achievements of our past an undeniable fact.

All in all, the first millennium witnessed the remarkable success of ancient Ethiopians. However, the glory could not surpass the first millennium. Particularly, over the course of the second millennium the country has tumbled-down from the pinnacle of advanced civilization to that of pervasive poverty and backwardness.

We Ethiopians have always been the makers of our history, be it good or bad, for we are the only African countries never colonized by any foreign nations. Therefore, as we are rightly proud of the sacrifices that every generation of Ethiopians have made to maintain our independence, we deeply feel ashamed and humiliated to see our country being one of the poorest countries in the world.

Prolonged internal conflicts and civil wars were responsible for the downfall of the Ethiopian civilizations. These conflicts has two basic causes; competition for power at the center and popular revolt against those in power. This does not however to mean that external forces such as colonialism, interstate conflicts, and other geopolitical factors had no contribution to the tragic collapse of the nation.

Yet, the primary source of the crisis is the marginalization of a bigger section of society from power and resource sharing as well as the failure on the part of the successive rulers to recognize and embrace diversity. Although diversity is a challenge almost everywhere, it is uniquely so in Ethiopia for the issue in our country is exceptionally deep and complex. Our country is a nation extensively endowed with plenty of ethno-cultural diversities. The country consists of more than 75 nations, nationalities and peoples with their own respective historical, cultural, linguistic, religious and other remarkable peculiarities.

Despite such peculiarities, the Ethiopian Nations, Nationalities and Peoples were anonymously ignored for ages. They were also mercilessly oppressed and exploited for centuries. Their basic human rights and democratic freedoms were denied. All in all, the diverse peoples of the country had been politically marginalized, socially dominated and economically exploited.

The national oppression and exploitation got worse during the second half of the 19th century. It was at this period that the ruling political order sought to create a modern, unitary and highly centralized state rooted in a single national identity, anchored on the subordination of all Ethiopian nations and nationalities to the language, culture and religion of a particular group privileged by the ruling class. This has made the diverse peoples of Ethiopia to be nothing but slaves and serfs to the ruling class and its adherents, their identities scorned, their land forcefully taken away and their labor exploited.

Although the language, culture and to some extent religion of the seemingly privileged group where the ruling elite came from were not subject to repression for obvious reason, the people was not immune from other forms of exploitations. Nonetheless, the consecutive regimes, in their effort to elongate their stay in power on the principle of 'divide and rule', succeeded a little in depicting an image on the minds of many as if this group was exceptionally

beneficial and as if it has irreconcilable interests with the others. These created seeds of bitter feelings of inequality and mutual mistrust among the diverse peoples.

Having lived for centuries together in tolerance and mutual co-existence, these diverse peoples have indeed developed shared interests and a common outlook through continues interactions on various levels and forms of life. However, the persistence of mistrust and feelings of injustice contributed a lot to lengthen the life of the oppressive regimes, by making efforts to forge a united struggle very difficult.

No matter how long it took, the unreserved struggle and priceless sacrifice ended the rule of the exploitative regimes once and for all. The defeat of the derge, Africa's most brutal dictatorial regime, with the central role of Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), paved the way to undertake a radical transformation of the country's political system.

The year 1991 marked a stark departure from the past. The political system that survived almost a century was fundamentally altered. The previous highly centralized and oppressive unitary state was completely replaced by an extremely decentralized federal system. As per the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution, the principal objective of the new federal arrangement is to building one political and economic community capable of

ensuring a lasting peace, guaranteeing a democratic order, and advancing an equitable socio-economic development. The vision to establish such a community was conceptualized through a decision made by all nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia in full and free exercise of their right to self-determination. This momentous decision aims at rectifying historically unjust relationship established by the previous regimes and creating a democratic political union and economic integration based on the principles of equality, mutual respect and shared interests.

The Constitution opened a new chapter of political history in the nation. It ensures the basic human rights and the fundamental democratic freedoms of the Ethiopian nations, nationalities and peoples for the first time in their history. Each and every door of exploitation, oppression and inequality was closed once and forever. Ethiopians entered to a new era of equality and mutual cooperation to safeguard and ensure their common interests which they paid unreserved sacrifices for.

What we designed is a home-grown system of governance with an Ethiopian outlook on democracy, peace and development that fit our unique circumstances well. Even to the amazement of external commentators, the path we took was indeed a radically new way that reversed the previous backward and biased regimes' policies and actions. In line with the objectives and principles of the FDRE

constitution, the government of Ethiopia chose a democratic developmental state as the best solution to come out of the vicious circles and poverty traps. Accordingly, we have developed and implemented a consistent set of policies and strategies for overall socio economic development that reflect the importance of the agricultural sector in the nation's development aspirations.

The system had not been welcomed both domestically and in the outside world. It rather met every resistance possible almost from all directions. The domestic resistance came from the remnants of the previous regimes. These people had difficulties accepting the new reality happened to exist in the country. The new vision and path we chose went also against the interest and expectations of some western countries and international financial institutions such as IMF and World Bank. These foreign actors not only denied the necessary support that our country desperately wanted at that time but also cursed it as it would eventually and inexorably lead the country to the tragic fate of the then Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and USSR.

What have been happening since then was, however, the contrary. Ethiopia's political and economic experiments have emerged as a success story. After 20 years of implementation, the federal system has brought remarkable socio economic changes that objectively altered the lives of millions of people. For much of the last decade,

Ethiopia has shown a strong economic performance. The economy has experienced broad based growth, registering an average annual real growth rate of 11.4 for the year 2003/04 - 2010/11.

The development of social sectors such as education, health and drinking water services has been also tremendous. Ethiopia has done quite well in terms of meeting universal primary education targets over the last decade, with national Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for primary and secondary education reaching 95.3% and 24.4% respectively for the year 2011/2012. There has been a substantial increase in potential health service coverage from only 50.71% in 1999/2000 to 92.9% in 2011/12. By the same token, access to safe water supply increased nationally from 21.1% in 1994/95 to 73.3 in 2010/11. Similar significant achievements have also been observed in such sectors as transport, telecommunication and electricity during the same period.

These all successes are indeed the real fruits of our Democratic Federal System. Ethiopia only survived as a nation and marched towards development through the successful management of its diversities. In an environment of deep and multiple diversities, peace and sustainable development can only be achieved with a mechanism that ensures equitable and fair sharing of power and resources, with economic opportunity availed for all without discrimination. What Ethiopia has done is exactly the same.

The democratic federal constitution that Ethiopia adopted made it possible for the diverse peoples of the country to be on top of their own local affairs, to manage their local affairs in an autonomous fashion. It allowed them to use and develop its own language, to express, develop and promote its culture, to preserve its history and also to have a full measure of self-government. On top of these, the constitution permitted equitable representation of these diverse peoples in State and Federal governments so that they have been able to participate in the common federal political process in an equal basis.

The fact that we now have a system that allows us to accommodate diversity means that we removed the Achilles heel of the country that had exposed us to all kinds of instability and violence for a very long period. This has enabled us to concentrate on development, because we have achieved relative peace, far better peace than we have had for centuries.

The fact that we have a system that accommodates diversity means that every village is able to design its own plan within the national framework and hence maximize the impact of its own local assets, much more so than any centralized plan could ever achieve. Self rule which is one of the fundamental principles of federalism has made it possible for people to release their own energies and maximize the impact of their own assets. It has created plenty of

opportunity for public participation. This Popular participation is reflected not only in occasional elections, but also in matters of fundamental policy making and its implementation.

For instance, peoples at the grass root level have been participating freely in such local developmental activities as soil and water resource management, afforestation and road construction worth of millions of dollars every year. Public expenditure has been seen only as a catalyst that ignites the huge engine of development, that is, the labor and other resources of the mass including the private sector.

Despite all what had been done and achieved, our government strongly believes that our national survival will still be in question until enduring peace, stable democratic order with a functioning state and robust economy is assured. That was why we have been acting in a sense of urgency in the past. That is why we have to move at a break-neck speed towards that vision in the near future.

Ethiopia has now become a nation where rapid and sustainable development has been realized. The federal system together with the policies and strategies of the democratic developmental state put us in a very better position. In another 10 to 15 years, it is also expected that they would take us out of poverty and place us amongst nations that are on dependable course to prosperity.

However, given the situation we are in, it is obvious that a much faster pace of socio-economic development is required if the vision we wish to attain is to be realized. And Ethiopia rightly believed that under the current global influence, unilateral endeavor to come out of conflict, poverty and backwardness has its own limit. It is inevitable that the existing insecurity and underdevelopment in the region does threaten Ethiopia's endeavor to peace and development. Therefore, it is indispensable for us to forge a regional approach to peace and development with concerted efforts of the other countries of the Horn.

Recognizing this fact well, Ethiopia has actively engaged itself in creating a regional political and economic partnership thereby allows the region to exploit the opportunities that can lift people out of the quagmire of poverty and instability. One important core element essential for the realization of regional integration is infrastructural development such as transportation and communication systems. Ethiopia has launched extensive road construction that connects it to its neighbors including Sudan, Southern Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia and Kenya. It has also started to build new railway links and improve the old ones to connect with Djibouti, Sudan and South Sudan.

On a different but related note, our government is heavily investing in mega hydro electric power generation projects to satisfy not only

its domestic needs but also regional need. Ethiopia has already started to supply up to 65 MW of power to Djibouti and about 100 MW to Sudan. A deal has also been signed with Kenya to supply 400 MW of hydro electric power. Ethiopia entered in to similar trading agreement with South Sudan.

Ethiopia has now taken the path towards a renaissance. We have begun to fight back the darkness of poverty and backwardness with success. Along the path of multinational democratic federalism, we are collecting positive results. And we are sure that if we continue to sustain the achievements we made so far, the path we took will lead us towards prosperity and civilization.

I thank you!