



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE VIABILITY OF ETHIOPIAN FEDERAL POLITY FOR PEACEFUL INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the politics of ethnicity and ethnic federalism in the era of globalization. In this globalization era, the quest for identity and states design for adopting the dynamism are the central tasks of states. After the demise of the Derge regime the FDRE government adopted ethnic based federalism as a response to ethnic diversity and former centralized systems of administration. Hence, the federal polity experiment neither it disintegrated the political community and nor it reduces the occurrence of ethnic conflicts in the country.

INTRODUCTION

Political incidents in various part of the world in the past two decades have engrossed new consideration to the strength and weakness of federal solution as a way of resolving political problems. This has resulted in many academic literatures try to reassess the essence of federalism and to realize the assumption and practice of federalism as well as the process of integration and disintegration of particular political community (Watts, 1998). Basically, federalism can be defined as a method of formally dividing power between different levels of government in a given nation. It is both principle and practice that deals how the political system functions (Aryo,2003). In a similar context, federalism can also be defined as the dissection of political authority in to different levels of government. The main tenet of federalism, therefore, is the formal division of power across different levels of government (Strong and Morgan). Since the end of cold war politics, federalism emerged in to the spotlight as a result of two incompatible developments. The first development is the disintegrations of USSR, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia re-energized doubts about the resilience and decisiveness of multi-ethnic federalism.

The continuing confrontation in Canada over the question of Québec and the political deadlock over the Belgium political system also shows the difficulty of the multi ethnic federal projects. The second development is the politicians persistent use to reconstitute multi-ethnic countries through federalism after the failure of military governments as well as after the failure of unitary nation building projects (Kefale, 2013). Ethiopia is an old state which has remained independent throughout its history. It, however, emerged with its present ethnic composition after the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by territorial expansionist policy of Menilk. The history of the country is distinguished by intra and inter-state conflicts. The causes of conflict could be explained by the nature of the state-its practice of exclusionary politics. It follows that conflicts in Ethiopia have ethnic and local dimensions (Adegehe, 2009). Following the demise of the Derg government in 1991, Ethiopia has adopted and transformed its political structure in to a multi-ethnic federalism which is both unique and fundamental (Turton, 2005). The framers of the 1995 FDRE constitution claimed that they have obtained a solution for regional autonomy and right to secession. On the opposite side of the coin, the opponents of this federal project argued that ethnic based federal type invites ethnic conflict and may result disintegration from the broader political community. Hence, the federal project based on ethnicity remains contesting and unsettled in today's Ethiopian politics (Habtu, 2003). Studies conducted on Ethnic relations and Ethiopian federalism by

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Adegehe (2009), Habtu (2003), Abbink (1993) and Regasa (2007) in Benshangul Gumuz, Gambela and Somalia, the Dizi and Suri in southern Ethiopia as well as in Gedeo and Guji relations respectively shows that there is an escalation of conflict after the federal project has been introduced. However, the inter-ethnic conflict differs in degree and regional dimensions. These researches conducted in different regional parts of Ethiopia and various ethnic groups puts in question the resilience of the federal project in maintaining peace in the era of globalization. In contrary to the above mentioned cases, studies conducted in northern Ethiopia taking the Afar and Raya Azebo inter-ethnic relations by Fentaw (2010) shows that the inter-communal relations after 1991 is somehow peaceful. The role of indigenous institutions on conflict resolution, interdependence and intermarriage between these groups has been mentioned as factors for building peace in this area. The main aim of this article is to assess the viability of Ethiopia's Federal polity for peaceful inter-ethnic relations in the era of globalization. It will try to investigate how the Ethiopian federal political system functions for promoting peaceful inter-ethnic relations in the context of globalization. Under this research topic the subsequent research questions will be addressed.



Source: Aalen (2002:6).

### Experiment of federalism in Ethiopia

The African region has reflected surmounted divergence in determining the approaches to government structure. Habib (2010) noted that the African countries mainly emerged either as decolonization process or as a response to the internal dynamics. Some of the structure of government such as East

African federation and central Africa federation are established to create viable economic unit. Currently, after the demise of Derg regime, Ethiopia is experimenting ethnic based federalism. It mainly envisioned to power decentralization and conflict resolution among ethnic groups by accommodating the diversity. Studies mad by Merara, Assefa and Kymilcka (2002) shows that the difficulty remains on addressing the competing interests of elite groups.<sup>1</sup> Aalen (2002) argued that during the last ten years of experience federalism of the Ethiopian state is neither disintegrated nor it eradicates the escalation of conflicts. Beginning from the early history of Ethiopia and Ethiopian politics there was a continuous dispute among groups and emperors. The historical political developments in the country laid a strong hold base for the current state structure. For many years Ethiopia was ruled by centralized states policy where many groups were dominated and excluded from the main stream politics of the state.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the current federal political system is the outcome of the political dynamics held for centuries. This resulted in the establishment of the FDRE constitution in 1995. According this constitution, the federal polity has two orders of governments. While the federal government has a constitutional responsibility for administering the monetary and budgeting for major development establishments such as the Great Renaissance dam, the regional government powers remains for administering, implementing issues concerning their regional authority. The preamble of the constitution unveils the historical developments held in the country. It introduces as follows:

*we, the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia.... Strongly committed..... Exercise of our right to self-determination, to building apolitical community founded on the rule of law and capable of ensuring lasting peace, guarantying a democratic order, and advancing its economic and social developments (FDRE constitution, 1995).*

Nevertheless, taking the introductory cases of the practical quest and the enduring conflicts between different ethnic groups the practicality and viability of the federal political system remains in questions. It is also very contesting among scholars and politicians across the country.<sup>3</sup> To make a curiosity in analyzing this sensitive issue the roots of the conflict laid from two main edges of Ethiopian Politics. With a fresh mind let's see the two fundamentals of current political dynamics.

### The incompatible explanation on Ethiopian History

Mains (2004) describes that the federal polity of Ethiopia should be understood from the contexts of its political history. This implies the political history of a country has a surmounted impact on the present state projects. Hence, the history of Ethiopia during the ninetieth century becomes the fundamental

<sup>1</sup>Competing interests refers to the incompatible elite dynamics on the interpretation of Ethiopia political history.

<sup>2</sup> Ethnic groups, large religious segments such as Muslims were neglected from the mainstream agenda of the state. It was basically the result of discriminatory policies of the emperors.

<sup>3</sup> Many scholars argue on the achievement of the federal system and its role in promoting peaceful inter-ethnic relations.

aspect to understand the political process of the present day. During the nineteenth century different kingdoms were unified to the Modern Ethiopia by emperor Menilk. During this period, the norther part of the country was unified political entity. The northerners participate in during Menilk expansion to the south and south west.<sup>4</sup>This expansion of territory and modern state formation had resulted in loss of human population in the south and south west part of the contemporary Ethiopia.

Hence, Gudiana (2006) concentrates on the paradox of the elites in interpreting the history of the country. This understandings of history leads the game of the democratic transition to ethnic political mobilization. This mobilization of ethnicity has a pendulum of Centre-petal and centrifugal forces which shape the Ethiopian political spectrum. Hence, Gudiana (2006) presented the political continuum of Ethiopia in to three historical forces (1) the nation building thesis- it argues the political history of Ethiopia is back to the three thousand years. This makes the country ancient in its presences. (2) the national oppression thesis- it argues the political history of the country was distinguished by conflict and oppression. Hence, the solution to them is the federalist approach for accommodating the diversity. (3) the colonialist approach- it argues that the political history of Ethiopia was a history of domination by dominant groups. Ethnic groups were excluded from the main stream national agenda. They remain bystanders on issues that affect their political, social and economic life. They equated the situation as a prison of nations and nationalities. Hence, the solution they outlined is full independence from the empire and the prison. This includes groups such as Eritrean liberation front. Hence, this political spectrum bases mainly in incompatible understandings of the nineteenth century modern history of Ethiopia. This pendulum of politics shifts the power and thought among elite groups. It also radically shifts the political structure of the state. As a result, the experiment of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia was born from this historical incidence. To make it clear, it was not only ethnic groups who were excluded from the main stream national agenda but also religious groups.<sup>5</sup>

### Polarized views on the politics of ethnicity

After the formation of modern state, the spectrum of politics as I have analyzed above has made a significant shift towards a political formation based on ethnicity. However, the academicians and politicians of the country are in a contesting debate on the viability of the federal project for peace among ethnic groups. The government argues the ethnic based federalism was a solution and a base for the diversity in the country. According to them, it was a solution to stop a war and bring equality among ethnic groups while at the same time it reduces the groups from session. Nevertheless, many academicians put into question the viability of the federal

<sup>4</sup> The south and south west parts of the country were in a separated kingdom with their own system of administration before the Menilk expansion. Latter, these groups were incorporated in to the modern state.

<sup>5</sup> The Muslim majority in Ethiopia were also excluded from the national politics. Though their number is high, it was only during FDRE government the religious diversity come in to view. However, there are still question which are contesting in religious diversity and tolerance. The issues of secularism and religious education are the central feature of the national affairs. This also intertwined with the global development held in different areas.

project by equating the political system with the historical experience of Yugoslavia and USSR disintegrations. For some academician the ethnic based political system is a possible way out from the historical problem. Contrary to this, for many academicians the ethnizing politics and increasing tension between civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism is a problem for national interest of the country itself. Unlike the above cases, the participants of the fifth international forum of federations presented that what works in federalism is its working progress. It has to be deeply rooted in social, economic and political history of the country. And they noted that the federal system matters for bringing equitable distribution of political power and resource among citizens. However, this remains a normative footprint for examining the political projection. For others like Gudiana (2006) what works for federalism is the balance of power between the federal and regional government based on the constitution. Hence, its success and failure cannot be examined at a short period of time. It needs long time to test.<sup>6</sup>

### Policy implications

Ethiopia is a mosaic country with multi-linguistic, multi-religion ad multi-ethnic groups in its entire population. This diversity and beauty of cultural difference should create a plat forum for understanding, and sharing of culture values for improving the nation. Instead of ethnic narrowness and greedy among elites, there should be basic understandings for unveiling the truth for the public. In a time where socio-economic and political development became highly connected through advancing technologies, Africa states must focus for peaceful relations among their citizens. Coming in to consensus and national forum for understandings between the government, the elite groups and academicians has unfolded impact over citizen's life. The above explained pendulums of the political spectrum that shift the power among ethnic groups must come in to mutual understanding for establishing political commonality. I think this cannot be mischief and unrealistic political calculation for all of them. Unless, the question at hand will remain unsettled for prolonged time while the tensions will remain there on the pendulum.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Federal political systems are working progress to fit the international developments and its domestic politics on issues that affect the citizens lives.

<sup>7</sup> The pendulum is the base for the political spectrum or thesis in the country's political history. It is a swift mechanism for shift of power when one group takes the power over national politics.

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