Does Ethnic Federalism Exacerbating or Reducing Conflicts? The Ethiopian Federal Experiences

Authors
Alene Agegnehu*and Worku Dibu*
*Department of Civic and Ethical Studies, Adigrat University, Ethiopia Po. Box. 50
Email: *aleneagegnehu@gmail.com*

Abstract
The language based federal arrangement is a new frontier under the Ethiopia political scenario. Unlike the previous regime which overlooked various ethnic groups of the nation, the current political system recognized the presence of multiplicity of ethnic identity and taken it as a main political value for the reengineering of the present Ethiopia. Initially, it seems the solution that responds old nationality question of the country through recognizing each ethnic group as an equal partner of the federal arrangement with the power to administer its internal affairs autonomously. Hence, it brought a modest peace and stability so that the economy of the state arguably, registered a double digit growth for the last two decades. As time goes, for the past two decades, however, unmanageable problem has being emerged throughout the country. A continuous claim for recognition of new identity, high potential for secessionist demand, problem of demarcation of internal territory between ethno-nationalist region, and the issue of irredentism, and indigenous-settler dichotomy brought pervasive and protracted conflict between different ethnic groups which become the cause for the casualty of human life and destruction of resources. This article therefore try to assess whether ethnic based federalism is feasible or not in Ethiopia, to investigate the root cause of ethnic based and boundary related conflicts that are observing now in different parties of the state.
Keywords: *Federalism, Ethnic Federalism, Territorial Federalism, Ethiopian Federal System.*

Introduction

Federalism by definition entails the combination of *'shard rule'* with common institution and regional '*self rule'* with autonomous power (Elazar 1987). It demands the existence of at least two tiers of governments at a time where they are autonomous in their own areas of competence. In other words, Federalism involves a territorial division of power between constituent units – sometimes called provinces, cantons, regions, possibly cities and states, and the central government (Watts, 1998). According to Lijphart (1977), a democratic or consociational federalism, among others characterized by: *grand coalition, the ruling political elites of each member unit run its tasks in accordance with the interest of their electorate; mutual veto or proportional agreement is required rather than majority rule; representing*

member units based on their population size, proportionality and segmental autonomy whereby each federal units is autonomous).

To explain it differently, federalism can be understood as a form of governmental and institutional structure designed by the will of the stakeholders to maintain unity while also preserving diversity through shared rule (Odion, 2011). According to Elazar (1987), Federalism is a mode of political organization which unites separate polities within an overarching political system so that it induces each polity to maintain its political integrity. Federalism as a political order demands: i) the delimitation of boundaries and the composition of the member units (i.e. along geographical, ethnic, and/or cultural lines); ii) the distribution of power between the member units and the central government; iii) the

assignment of power-sharing or a form of influence by member units in central decision-making bodies within the interlocking political systems; and iv) Maintaining sufficient democratic control over the central bodies (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2003).

The concept of ethnic[1] federalism at global level

The relevance of ethno-linguistic federation has open debate. According to Proudhon, (1991) for Jacobins unitarism perspectives, federalism has a clearly negative connotation. This concept states that the federative structure weakens and endangers the unity of the state, especially if the federative structure is an ethno-federal one. In post-1789 French history federalism was linked with counter-revolutionary intentions, and later it contradicted the language of homogenizing and state centralizing policy. Hence, for modern Jacobinists- federalism is inconsistent with the very principles of the equality of people and of the sovereignty, as member states with smaller populations will be over-represented that allowed them to enjoy extra rights. Ethnic based federalism therefore rejected as it gives extra rights given to these ethnic groups lead to discrimination that divides people, and the state institutions ensuring their territorial segregation destroy the unity of the nation and state and threaten with secession (Juhasz, 2005). He further tried to note that, the shortfall of democratic and its potential to destroy the unity of the state cannot be balanced by any other benefits of a federation. Consequently, unitarism is a prerequisite condition for most Western European states to realize the unity of the state, political stability and to assure effective economic development. It is federalism therefore that makes secession easier in that federation of Canada with radical separatist ideas, Quebec.

However, others stood against such understandings. For those who support federalism argued that federalism cannot destroyed the unity of the state but is a means of nation-building device. The over representation of state with small population shall be conceived as protecting minorities from the tyranny of the majority. By recognizing self rule of politically autonomous member units, federalism encourages local units and increase their confidence to have a say in selecting their own rulers of the region concerned, to bring about political stability and also to select rulers of their counties who can be held accountable for their decisions. The acknowledgment of democratic autonomous self-rule in federation has a promise to regime provides a system of checks and balances between ethnic, regional and national levels, and reduces the fears of minorities (Bergman, 2011).

Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia

After the over lasting of unitary system since the last decade of 20th century, federal system was adopted aimed with solving a century old nationality problems. Since then, policy makers considers ethnic contradiction as the primary problem in the country's politics and reaffirms ethnic federalism along ethno-linguistic lines with the right to self administration for all regional states including the right to secession (Adegehe, 2009). The then political elites tested ethnic based federalism as a cure for the state problems rather than territorial arrangement. As a result, the recognition of territorial autonomy of geographically concentrated ethnic groups is an imperative component of the Ethiopian federal system, which constitutes one of the major features of the 1995 Constitution and the basis for the internal demarcation of the federal units (Yonatan, nd[2]).

The choice of ethnicity as the foundation for the territorial organization of the state made the Ethiopian federation in the league of multi-national federations[3] as opposed to mono-national federations. In a territorial or administrative federalism, the internal boundary lines are drawn according to geographical or administrative convenience. The member units beg off to reflect its ethnic diversity in the territorial division of the federation. The state functions on the premise that

the various communities form a common society. A multi-national federation, on the other hand, often takes ethnicity as the basis for the organization of the state and draws the internal boundary of a state along ethnic lines- which commonly referred to as the 'ethnic' model of federalism (The 1995 FDRE constitution Art,47). Under this model, ethno–regional communities are considered as most appropriately represented through their spatial compartmentalization (states, cantons, etc), predicated on the belief that ethno–regional or national communities should receive due territorial recognition". Boundaries drawn to coincide with ethnic divisions are the basic feature of this approach and the Ethiopian federation is a typical example of this model (Yonatan, nd).

By making this, the Ethiopian federal system has provided them with a territorial room, which is essential for the preservation and promotion of their language, culture and identity and the self management of ethnic groups. For example, the federal Constitution under article five[3] recognizes the equality of all languages of the nation and allows member units of the federation to determine their respective working language (The 1995 FDRE constitution).

However, the implementation of Ethnic-based federalism for the last two decade in Ethiopia has produced polarizing debates among scholars and practitioners. Advocator have argued that implementing ethnic federalism in Ethiopia has rendered stability and has provided each region the opportunity to develop, promote, and preserve its language and culture. As pervasively argued by Simoeon (1982), ethno-national federation not only fosters deliberation and political participation but it also enhances the citizens' capacity to empathize with one another more readily than in a heterogeneous setting.

Federalism has face political citric from the opponents. For example, as argued by Fleiner (2006), the formation of autonomous ethnic units of federalism may weaken national unity or create loyalty conflicts leading to a decline of loyalty toward the national state and potentially encourage separatist tendencies. Self-administration of ethnic groups in the long-run, will greatly promoting ethnic consciousness that strengthens sense of uniqueness, feelings of in-group and out-group and providing institutional backup for competing nationalists to eventual secession (Anderson, 2009). Ethnic based federalism leads the fragmentation of ethnicity due to the rise of newly growing demands of ethnicity claim which could be known as *'beginning of new ethnic identities'* which encourages claim of ethnicity hood. It also open the way for the proliferation of several ethnic-based political parties. From the 81 political parties currently registered with the National Electoral Board who compete for government position, 73 of them are ethnic based parties (Markakis,1998, Yonatan, nd). These nation based organization of political parties manipulates and convince the ethnic groups that they belongs and hence, it prevents the formation of viable trans-ethnic parties so that it could not posses nationwide popular support that enable them to lead the state. This was the evidence that throughout the five consecutive regular national elections, the ruling dominant party, EPRDF arguably win the election repeatedly (Aalen, 2002).

It also observed that there are constant demands of ethnic groups to be incorporated or transferred into one or another regional unit is another indication of the fragmentation of the population along ethno-linguistic lines. Many small ethnic groups that have been demarcated into Oromia Regional State have demanded to be incorporated into SNNPR. Similarly, ethnic groups in the latter have demanded to be transferred into other regional states (Yonatan, nd). Currently we are testimony about the people who found at the border area of Tigray and Amhara regional[4] who previously incorporated in to Tigray region since the inception of federal system but now there is an increasing demand of making them as part of Amhara ethnic group by refusing that they are historically not belong to Tigray regions as if

demarcated. It is because this restless demand of these communities incorporating themselves with the Amhara region and the deliance of the government's response that out broke popular revolts and displacement of civilians. Inspite of these pragmatic facts, Article 46 of the 1995 EPRDF constitution has theoretically used settlement patterns, identity, language and consent of the people concerned as the basic criteria for delimiting the boundary of the federal units. The practice however overlooks the first two and the last criteria, which merely takes language as the only defining feature. Consequently, the form of government is thus said to be a 'language-based ethnic federalism as Aregawai rightly argues.'

The other danger of ethnic federation is that it creates contentious relationship among the multiple ethnic groups in the country. Ethno-national political elite in Ethiopia are found in constant competition over a range of issues which linked with ethnicity, ostensibly representing their respective ethnic constituency. Hence, it succumb and generate unregulated fiercely ethnic competition and fighting over the nearby ethnic boundaries, access to state resources, over grazing territory or water, etc which leading to violent ethnic conflicts (Aregawi, nd ,Markakis,1998).

It is therefore, the ethnic federal administration that is responsible for the newly emerged ethno-linguistic conflicts in the state. Instead of meaning fully managing the complex ethno-linguistic diversity of the country and reducing conflicts; an intense ethnic competition and conflicts now are increase rapidly and overtly happened. Apparently, no ethnic group in Ethiopia seems to have smooth relationship and live at peace with its neighbor. These ethnic-based conflicts have now overtly observed in the central and northeast regions of the country (Turton, 2006). As he observed, the spread and ferocity of ethnic based conflicts is an alarming rate.

The causes of most conflicts are associated with issues of self determination/secession, the politics of resource sharing, political power, representation, identity, ethnic and regional boundaries and others. An artificial demarcation of boundaries between or among regions generates violent conflicts among various ethnic groups. For example, there were protracted ethnic conflict between Afar and Somali-Issa region in the north east since 2000 due to resource bases competition, the Borana and Garri in the south in 2001, the Karrayu Oromo and Afar in the center and the Nuer and Anywaa in the southwest in 2002, the Oromo and Somali in the southeast in 2003, the Neur, Anywaa[5] (in Gamella) and highlanders[6] in the southwest in 2004, the Oromos and non-Oromos in south and southeast in 2005 (Abbink, 2006, Assefa Fiseha,2006).

Ethno-regional conflicts based on boundary demarcation were widely spread with for example Oromia and Somali, Oromia with Gambella and currently Amhara region with Tigray due to blurred boarder delimitation between the two and identity issues (Adegehe, 2009; Siraw, 2014). The degree of conflict becomes worst in those regions which are diverse in its ethic composition such as in Gambella, southern nation, nationalities and peoples. There were black histories recorded in Gambella because of the protracted conflict between different ethnic groups live in the region. The bloody conflict between Anywaa, Nuer and Mazinger in Gambella since 2006 and the Nyangatom and Kara and in Derashe and konso Woredas of southern part of Ethiopia in 2007 and 2008 respectively were among others which were typically ethnic based. Those episodes brought the death of thousands of people and tens of thousands were injured, their properties were confiscated and more people were displaced from their homestead (Abbink, 2006, Dereje, 2006, EHRC Report, 2008).

Also, there is an indigenous and highlander (settlers)[7] dichotomy in the regions though they live there and own their resources. As a result, the highlanders were treated as secondary citizens and strong pressures usually exerted to leave the regions as they are settlers not indigenous as that of the people of the region. Many Amhara

descendent people, who settled in Benshagul_Gumuz[8] region over years, were forcefully displaced to their homeland region since 2005/6, which is absolutely contrary to the constitutional provision. The same scenario was happened in southern region, who many people were displaced being they are not belongs to southern regions. They were denied their constitutional rights of access to regional resources and opportunities due to narrowed regional and local citizenship to the level of primordial ethnicity which in turn brought frequent conflict between the settlers and the home-grown (Abbink, 2011; Adegehe, 2009). The political rights of those non-indigenous people settled in Benishangul-Gumuz and other states are undermined and overridden by group rights of since 2005 election, which later the issues solved by the upper house of the federation (Assefa, 2009; Gebremichael, 2012). Settlers of Amhara, Oromo and Tigray people who live in B_G[9] region were denied their rights to be elected as stated in the constitution under article 38 which reads: Article 38(1) "every Ethiopian national, without any discrimination based on colour, race, nation, nationality, sex, *language*, religion, political or other opinion or other status has the rights:

a) To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly and through freely chosen representatives,
b) On the attainment of 18 years of age to vote in accordance with law,
c) To vote and to be elected at periodic election to any office at any level of governments.

In contras to this, highlander candidates notably from Amhara, Oromo and Tigray nationalities for the 2005 election for the regional council were prohibited on the basis that they are not able to speak any one of the five indigenous languages namely Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Komo and Mao. However, proclamation No. 111/ 1995 the criteria on candidacy state that, 'anyone who competes in election for regional council shall versed in the

vernacular of the national region of his intended candidature'. Inspite of this fact the regions and the national election board ignore the highlanders' political rights of being elected as regional council being they cannot speaks any language of the regions though they can speak official language of the region, Amharic[10] and they insisted that this cannot be seen as a violation of the Constitution on grounds of discrimination of the highlanders.

These are therefore the result of the political manipulation of ethnic identity by local cadres, that made the relationship among those ethnic groups exposed to confrontation and violence though they had lived by the sense fraternity and peacefully in the remote past. Moreover, the involvement of local political cadres has been visible after the 2005 national elections in Gida-Kiramu *woreda* in Wollega, where a few thousand Amhara farmers were hunted, their land was confiscated and they were forced to take refuge elsewhere (Abbink, 2006). Similarly, the Amhara ethnic group has been evacuated from Guraferda Woreda with the ethnic based self-administration as per the contradicting principles of Ethiopian constitution. The confrontation and latent conflict between the two dominant ethnic groups, Amhara and Oromo was add Benzene over inflame by the ruling party to sustain the domination of minority-TPLF over others via implementing divide and rule tactics. The ruling part reads unwritten history politically manipulates hostile relations that happened so far to escalate up conflicts between Amhara and Oromo to weaken the unity of the two so that it reduces potential challengers of the party (Abbink, 1997; Mohammed, 1999).

Due to this and other self- determination issue, many of the Oromo, Amhara, Tigray and other settlers have been intimidated and forcefully displaced from Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella regional states as per the principle of self-determination recognized by the constitution (Adimassu, 2013).

Such forced displacement of non-residents and subsequent violence of basic human and democratic rights, death, and confiscation of

property were often caused by ethnic competition and confrontation over local resources and political positions (Tronvoll,1998). This action is against the philosophy of the constitution which violates freedom against eviction from their possession and freedom from forced displacement as stated under article 40(4) of the FDRE constitution and other law of the country.

The reengineering and political manipulation of ethno-linguistic line really smashes the bond and deteriorates the cross-cutting cleavages like religion of various ethnic groups. As a result, religious division and antagonism among the two major religions, Orthodox Christianity and Islam is becoming common. These and other unstated cases made ethnic federalism to accentuate ethnic conflicts, facilitate secession, and eventually it leads to the disintegration of countries. It could overemphasize centrifugal[11]forces at the expense of centripetal[12] force (Teshome and Záhořík, 2008; Tronvoll, 1998).

An eventual development of centrifugal force within the federation makes ethnic federalism as a stepping stone for launching separatist movements. In addition, the formation of ethnic federalism has given rise to the belief that ethno-nationalist groups have the superiority to claim their rights to self-determination. In the final stage, through a well-engineered referendum process, some alienated ethnic groups could make demands up to and including secession (Huntington ,1993b:13-14 and Burgess 2012, 11). An ethnic group with secessionist potentials-which is due to its population number, its location near the borders or its external support can become a destabilizing factor of peace and security of the state (Juhasz, 2005).

Conclusion

The Ethiopian geographically concentrated ethnic based federation in the last quarter year of Federalization, the state of Ethiopian has neither disintegrated nor eradicated the perceived and actual conflicts between ethnic groups in the country. But what lesson we had from the federal system now is, the development and consolidation of centralized dominant party rule which is paradox of genuine federalism, manipulates ethnic group in search of enlarging its power through Appling a divide and rule approach. The paradox is emanated from the idea that centralized party rule and authentic federalism are incompatible as if powerful party manipulates ethnicity and undermines regional autonomy. This manipulation of ethnicity by the name of ethnic self-determination encourages the feeling of distinctiveness and gradually develops their own identities. The newly emergency of multiplicity of identities and the quest for recognition of new ethnicity succumb unmanageable tension and broke common values and other cross-cutting cleavages. It largely affects loyalty to the center by creating artificial loyalty to one's locality or ethnicity at the costs of the center. It brought a trade off or conflict of loyalty between the center and the units. Since the inception of ethnic federalism, the political cadres who are in power preach that one ethnic group (*notably Amhara*) was the historical enemy of others; one ethnic group was the beneficial and historical colonizer of the other ethnic groups. This mislead manipulation create frustration, hostility and unpleasant relationship among ethnic groups. Hence, one ethnic group looking others as historic enemy of them as if told by political elites so that they take a revenge action over others. This brought an erosion of social cohesion among various ethnic groups and is an immediate cause for the outbreak for ethnic based conflicts in different parts of the countries. We are now an eye witness for the presence of ethnicity complex, violent conflicts and displacement of the non-indigenous people and confiscations of their properties, treating or considering non-indigenous people as a secondary citizens etc are the results of tribal federation of Ethiopia. All in all, though initially ethnic federalism solve the old problems of the county and awarding the right to self-determination including the right to secession of ethnic groups, but later it creates new problems. It

encourages the emergency of newly growing minority groups which has yet not been known.

Reference

1. Aalen, Lovise (2002).Ethnic Federalism in a Dominant Party State:The Ethiopian Experience 1991-2000. Chr. Michelsen Institute,

2. Abbink, Jon (1998). New Configuration of Ethiopian Ethnicity: The Challenges of the South,' *Northeast African Studies* 5:1 59-81.

3. Abbink, Jon. (2006). Ethnicity and Conflict Generation in Ethiopia: Some Problems and Prospects of Ethno-Regional Federalism", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 24(3): 389-413.

4. Abbink, Jon. (2011). Ethnic-based Federalism and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Reassessing the Experiment after 20 Years", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5 (4), 596-618.

5. Adegehe, A. K. (2009). Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia: A Comparative Study of the Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz Regions", Doctoral Thesis, Department of Political Science, Leiden University.

6. Adimassu, Y.G. (2013). Implication of Ethiopian Federalism on the Right to Freedom of Movement and Residence: Critical Analysis of the Law and the Practice", Master's Thesis, Addis Ababa University.

7. Aregawi, Berhe (Nd). Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia: Genuine Federalism or Divide and Rule?

8. Asayehgn, Desta (2015). Beyond the Usual: Re-thinking Ethiopia's Ethnic Federalism for the 21st Century.

9. Assefa Fiseha (2006). Theory versus Practice in the Implementation of Ethiopia's Ethnic Federalism,'in David Turton ed., *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: James Currey, 2006): 131-164.

10. Assefa Fiseha (2007): Federalism and the Accommodation of Diversity in Ethiopia. A Comparative Study. Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers.

11. Leenco Lata, The Making and un making of Ethiopia's Transitional Charter,' in Asafa Jalata ed., *Oromo Nationalism and The Ethiopian Discourse: The Search for Freedom and Democracy,*

12. Desta, A. (2014). *From Economic Dependency and Stagnation to Democratic Developmental State.* Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press.

13. Desta, A. (August, 15, 2015). "Economic Growth and Governance in Ethiopia: An Observation." Ethiopian Observer.

14. Elazar, Daniel J (1987). Exploring Federalism. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press

15. Erk, J. and Anderson, L. (2009). The Paradox of Federalism: Does Self-Rule Accommodate or Exacerbate Ethnic Divisions?", *Regional & Federal Studies*, 19(2):191-202 http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.10 80/13597560902753388 (Last Consulted: 10 May 2015).

16. Fleiner, T. (2006). Challenges of Devolution and Power Sharing Structures in Federations. Paper for the Conference of SAIS and SOAS, London, November 17-19th, 2006.

17. Gebremichael, M. (2012). Federalism and Conflict Management in Ethiopia: Case Study of Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State", Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford,

18. Juhász, József (2005). Ethno-federalism: challenges and Opportunities. *Izvorni naučni rad*. *Vol. LVII, br. 3, pp. 245-263*

19. Keller, Edmond (2003). Ethnic Federalism and Democratization in Ethiopia,' *Horn of Africa*, v. XXI 30-43.

20. Kymlicka, Will 1998. 'Is federalism a viable alternative to secession?' in Lehning, Percy M. (ed.) *Theories of secession*. London: Routledge.

21. Markakis, John (1998). The Politics of Identity: The Case of the Guraghe in Ethiopia,' in Mohamed Salih and John Markakis eds., *Ethnicity and the State in Eastern Africa* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet)

22. Pierre Joseph, Proudhon (1991)."A foderacio elverol" (Du principe federatif), in: Andras Bozoki i Miklos Sukosd (eds.), *Anarchizmus*, Szazadveg, Budapest 1991, pp. 45-59.

23. Siraw, Megibaru (2014). Weaknesses of Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention. Volume 4 Issue 11. PP.49-54*

24. Tronvoll, Kjetil (1998). 'Negotiating conflicting identities: an outline for research into gender, ethnicity and nationalism in Eritrea and Ethiopia'. (Working paper) Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo/ Norwegian Institute of Human Rights.

25. Watts, Ronald (Fall 2000).Comparative Federalism and Post-Statism' *Publius*: *The Journal of Federalism* 30:4.

26. Yonatan, Fessha(nd). Federalism and the demarcation of internal boundaries: The territorial management of ethnic diversity in Ethiopia. The paper presented at the 17th workshop on: Federalism, community identity and distributive justice- University of the Western Cape.

Legal documents

27. Transitional Period Charter. Negarit Gazeta, No 1, 1991

28. The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 1994. Addis Ababa 1995, December 8.

29. Proclamation No. 1/1995, Proclamation of the Constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, *Federal Negarit Gazeta*, 1st Year No. 1, Addis Ababa-21st August, 1995, adopted on 8th of December 1994 and came into force on 21st August 1995.

30. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2003.