Ethnic-Based Federalism in Ethiopia and its Impact on National Integration

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Abstract

In multiethnic country, respect of diversity and ethnic equality is a major tool for national integration. To do this, strong good governance and democratic institutions are very important. In line with this, the state structure which is implemented by ruling political party has its impact on interethnic relations. In the history of Ethiopia, centralized political system during imperial and the Derg regime had long years’ experience and focused on nation-building, regardless of diversity. However, both of them were neither accommodate diversity nor stopped the question of nationalities. Thus, since the Derg took power, different ethnic based rebellions appeared in different parts of the country and escalated into extensive armed struggle. After seventeen years of civil war, 1991 was marked the collapse of the Derge regime and the formation of the new state structure under the ruling party, Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Thus, EPRDF implemented the identity-based federal structure by restructuring the constitution and answer the question of nationalities including self-determination up to secession. Therefore, this paper is aimed to assess the impacts of identity-based federalism on national integration.

Key Words: multiethnic, federalism, diversity, nationalities, identity-based, impact, centralize and national integration

Introduction

Ethiopia is one of the largest populations in Africa with more than 80 ethnic groups including diverse languages and religions. However, for long period of time the country was applied centralized systems of government with a great motto of “one Ethiopia, one destiny.”¹ Under this motto, their political objectives were nation-building. Such ambition of nation building was the distinct traits of African States. For instance, Berman, Eyoh and Kymlicka (2004:18) explain that “many African countries seek to downplay its role in national politics fearing it would have adverse impacts on their project of nation building.” According to their explanation, fearing of politicians to recognize diversity is related with separation and disintegration of

¹ Merera Gudina (2006:123)
national unity. Thus, they prefer to centralize power as the major instrument of nation building. This is because ethnic identity is an easy way for social cleavage and more comfortable for opponents to click and control adherents with common ideology.

The political history of Ethiopia is accounted within three periods of government systems like monarchical rule since 1270 (the restoration of Solomonic Dynasty) to 1974 (Ethiopian revolution), military regime since 1974 to 1991, and Federal state since 1991 to present. During the former two periods, the governments were focused on nation building and unable to accommodate diversity. However, their systems of political approach were not the same that the monarchical rule follow up the line of royal family and preserve the privileges of the king while the Derg regime aimed to create strong socialist country in Africa.

On the other hand, since 1991 the federal system recognized the diverse ethnic groups, language, culture, and religion under EPRDF. In this case Ethiopia took a divergent path from the rest of Africa when it constituted itself as an ethnic-based federation. In this case, post-1991, EPRDF established “nine regional states” based on their ethnic identity. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution was also formalized in 1995 with official recognition of diversity including “self-determination up to secession.”

Thus, regarding to the federal constitution, all regional states have their own flag, executive government, legislature, judiciary, and police; choose their own working language; and have unconditional rights to secession. However, the EPRDF ethnic-based federal structure has limitation to accommodate the different conception of Ethiopian statehood. This means it has been unsuccessful to accommodate people who wish to identify themselves first as Ethiopians.

With this and other reasons, according to Aalen (2002), the reconstitution of the Ethiopian state to an ethnic federation remains controversial. Thus, politicians and scholars are debated on the impacts of ethnic-based federalism and conflict in Ethiopia from different angles. One of the major debating issues was that ethnic federalism would help to end ethnic based conflicts. From this angle, as cited in Vaughan (2003:36-37), Meles Zenawi argued that “the key cause of the war all over the country was the issue of nationality.” Scholars like Turton (2006:1-2), Andreas (2003:143), and Pausewang, et al., (2002:230) are shared his argument by considering the restructuring of Ethiopia into an ethnic federation.

In contrast to this argument, Lyons (1996:25) suggests “organizing politics around ethnicity

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2 Article 47 of FDRE--Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromiya, Somali, Harari, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Sothrn Nations Nationality People.

3 Article 39 of FDRE Constitution, 1995:96

4 The former Prime Minister of Ethiopia
endangers ethnic tensions, violence, and more seriously encourages political activists to organize on parochial ethnic issues and thereby fragments national politics.” Similarly, Abbink (1997:172) states that “Ethiopia by constitutionalizing ethnicity sought to ‘reify and freeze ethnic identity which is by nature fluid and shifting’.” Alem Habtu (2003:2) also suggests that “opponents of ethnic federalism fear that it invites ethnic conflict and risks state disintegration.” Therefore, according to their arguments, identity-based federalism is a time-bomb threat for civil war and short cut of secession.

Generally, this paper will be accentuated the salient feature of federalism for Ethiopia, federalism and nation building, values of social capital, the nature of identity-based federalism and its impact on national integration, and assessed the long-run threats of identity-based federalism. Regarding to these discussions, the essence of social capital and interethnic interactions will be taken as the major benchmark of national unity with respect of diversity, equality and autonomous rights.

**Historical Background of Ethiopian State System: an overview**

According to Bahiru Zewde (1991), the reunification of Ethiopia was began with the rule of Emperor Tewodros II (1855-1868); and his successor Yohannes IV and Menelik II expanded Ethiopian empire into south ward as their base was in the north highlands. Emperor Haile Sellassie, who was crowned in 1930, further centralized the state apparatus. However, the imperial regime was unable to accommodate diversity. Thus, class struggle and the question of nationality were increased from time to time. Finally, the struggling groups were organized by military force and ended the imperial rule through coup d’état during the 1974 revolution.

Since 1974 the Derg regime was took power and exercised military rule in the country in a sense of unitary state. However, because of tyrannical ruling system and suppression of nationality, armed civil war broke out on the base of ethno-politics to find ethnic rights and regional autonomy, including secession. Finally, the armed civil war was completed in 1991 with the collapse of the Derg regime.

Therefore, 1991 was marked as the new era of Ethiopia under the ruling party of EPRDF and established federal state structure to accommodate diversity and sharing power among different levels of government. EPRDF were came to power as an alliance of four ethnically based parties such as Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF), Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement (SEPDM). Thus, EPRDF established nine identity-
based regional states and restructuring the constitution. According to Assefa Fesha (2006:132) “the federal constitution gives the impression that the federal state is a union formed through the free consent of each of the nation, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia and that it is therefore an example of ‘coming together’ rather than ‘holding together’ federalism.” Therefore, as to him, the Ethiopian federal system was introduced to guarantee the peaceful coexistence of different ethno-linguistic and religious groups.

**The Necessity of Federalism for Ethiopia**

What is federalism? What do we want from federalism? Is federalism could accommodate diversity and power sharing? Why federalism is preferable to diversified country? Is unitary state structure unable to accommodate diversity? Analyzing the necessity of federalism for Ethiopia is related with those questions. Thus, according to Diamond (2011:219), “to preserve federalism or to modify it or to make it effective and equitable are considerations that obviously raise the question of what precisely federalism is.” Therefore, to answer those questions and find out the importance of federalism for multiethnic country like Ethiopia, understanding the nature of the country and political circumstances are very important. In this understanding, the nature of Ethiopia is diversified and its current political circumstance is ethno-politics. The diversified nature of the country is unchanged but the political circumstance is depends upon the political scenario of the world.

According to Kincaid, (2011:xxxiii), “federalism is not an ideology but rather a set of principles rooted in such notions as voluntary cohabitation, self-rule and shared rule, and diversity in unity.” Similarly Assefa Fisha (2006) reflected in the above section that the introduction of Ethiopian federal structure is depends upon the free consent of the diverse people. Therefore, as Ethiopia has diverse nature, federal state structure is more appropriate. As such, the present arrangement of federal state structure is designed based on the political scenario and mission of the present ruling party.

Federalism is important for Ethiopia to preserve the distinct identity of diverse ethnic groups like language, culture, religion, and ethnic rights including regional autonomy. This is because, ethnic identities are sensitive to social cleavage and multicultural policy is important to accommodate diversity. Of course, there is no absolute state structure to fully accommodate diversity and create democratic state. In line to this reality, the nature of state structure and awareness of the people to exercise it in civilized way are important. Therefore, federalism is necessary for Ethiopia as the diverse nature of the country.
Federalism and Nation Building

Federalism is a political system in which power is divided and shared between the national/central government and the state (Riker, 1964 and Elazar, 1987). In this concept of federalism, there are two levels of government who have independent but interrelated power. The significance of their power relation is concentrated in the essence of nation building. Regarding to such power sharing, Wheare (1963) conceptualized federalism as the formal division of powers between levels of governments. On the other hand, Friedrich (1966:286) argues that “federalism is a process rather than a design.” In his argument, federalism should be seen as a process by which unity and diversity are politically organized and this process includes, like all political phenomena, persons, institutions and ideas. In this concept, according to Livingston (1956), the essence of federalism lies not in the institutional or constitutional structure but in the society itself. Therefore, the spirit of federalism lies in the society, because in a federal state structure, to build a nation the smooth interaction of different ethnic groups are crucial. In this sense, federalism should preserve and critically observe the basic social capital in multicultural society.

In multicultural country, the major target of federalism is to save a nation from civil war, devastation and disintegration with spices of social capital for the process of nation building/national integration. To achieve national integration, federalism devotes it’s time to develop systematic management formula in a diverse people. As such, Kincaid (2011:xxiv) states that “the most common historically to form a federal polity is to establish peace and security.” Therefore, national integration refers to the process of bringing together culturally and socially discrete groups into a national unity in respect of differences to eliminate sources of internal conflicts. In this sense, the principal values of federalism are accommodates diversity and sharing power among different groups. These principal values are the basic instruments for nation building in ethnically plural society like Ethiopia.

Values of Social Capital for National Integration

Social capital plays an important role in enhancing the efficiency of institutions, and the economic performance of national integration. Putnam (1993) claims about the centrality of cultural factors in determining institutional performance have received a great deal of attention. On the basis of an elaborate theoretical argument and extensive evidence drawn from the decades’ long study of regional governments, the major claim made by Putnam is that communities marked by high stocks of social capital will have better performing governments.
According to World Bank (1998), the social capital of a society includes the institutions, the relationships, the attitudes and values that govern interactions among people and contribute to economic and social development. Thus, the value of social capital, however, is not simply the sum of the institutions which underpin society; it is also the glue that holds them together for the essence of national integration. In this understanding, there are two public policy strategies for the achievement of national integration (Geertz, 1971). They are the establishment of national loyalties (perform values of social capital) without eliminating subordinate “cultures”; and develop the policy of “unity in diversity” which has been “dubbed federalism” and politically characterized by “ethnic arithmetic.” Therefore, social capital includes the shared values and rules for social conduct expressed in personal relationships, trust, and a common sense of civic responsibility that makes society more than a collection of individuals.

Generally, the value of social capital must ultimately be seen in the context of the contribution it makes to sustainable development (Serageldin, 1996a and 1996b). Therefore, according to Putnam (1993), the values of social capital in diversified country are facilitates coordination and cooperation for the mutual benefits within the community. This idea also strengthened by the definition of Cohen and Rogers (1992) such as social capital is the stock of active connection among the people; the trust, mutual understanding and shared values and behaviors that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative actions possible.

Identity-Based Federalism

The imperial rule and the Derg regime were unable to accommodate the diverse nature of Ethiopia. Thus, identity based political struggle was continued in different parts of the country as mentioned earlier. Then, in 1991, the identity-based political power, EPRDF, controls the country and provide itself to answer the question of nationalities and regional autonomy.

To apply federal state structure, EPRDF restructured the constitution in 1995. As such, the constitution is a multicultural document that explicitly recognizes Ethiopia’s plurality in its preamble by stating ‘We Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’. Thus, it provides the opportunity for ethnic groups to frame their status on their own interest. According to Livingston (2011:343), “federalism embraces not merely a diversity of opinion on one issue but a whole pattern of diversities on a number of issues.” Therefore, in the political circumstance of Ethiopia, both the politicians and academicians agreed that federalism is relatively a better state structure to protect...
tyranny. However, the debating issue was raised on the systems of federal arrangement.

One of the federal arrangements is “identity-based federalism”; which conform to the territorial distribution of ethnic groups continues to generate controversy among scholars of institutional design. For some, it is an effective means of alleviating deep ethnic divisions that can help to hold together the common state; for others, it is an insidious institutional formula for the inevitable disintegration of the common state. Thus, regardless of the debating issues, EPRDF applied identity-based federal structure by establishing nine autonomous ethnic-based regional states.

Regional States and Practical Experiences of Federalism

The nine regional states are established based on their ethnic identities, shared power and have regional autonomy. The 1995 FDRE Constitution also clearly point out the power and rights of regional states with unlimited rights of secession. However, the constitution doesn’t provide standard of criteria to define “nations, nationalities and peoples.” For these vague terminologies of identity-based federal structure, Turton clearly described as follows.

Because the constitution provides no standard criteria for distinguishing between nations, nationalities and peoples, these terms can be used as required to refer to ‘ethnic groups’ with population ranging from a few thousands to several millions as though they were of the same order. It also means that the ideology of ethno-national self-determination can be appropriated, even by the smallest group, in the struggle to obtain a bigger share of state and national resources. This helps to explain why the implementation of ethnic federalism in the multi-ethnic western and southern regions of the country has produced some of the worst ethnic-based violence to be seen in the country since the toppling of the former regime (2006:18-19).

According to Turton, the FDRE constitution is unable to clearly define the terms of nations, nationalities and peoples. Because of this confusion, in different regional states, different ethnic groups are experienced in conflict either with their neighbors or the government.

Despite of identity-based federalism, different ethnic groups have constitutional rights to move and live in different regions in the country. Each regional state also manipulates its power based on its own rules and regulation under the umbrella of FDRE Constitution. In these autonomous rights, the regional governments administer citizens in different ways. For instance, in Oromia region, many ethnic groups other than of Oromo are living together based on “freedom of movement”. However, within the region they have to speak the regional language and meet the identity criteria of

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5 Critics of this institutional form lend to use the terms “ethnic federalism”, “ethnofederalism”, “multinational” or “plurinational” federalism.

7 Article 32 of FDRE Constitution
the regional constitution, unless they couldn’t exercise their rights properly.

In the region, the democratic concept of federal structure is defined based on the ethno-political arrangements. In this case, within the region, the Oromo people and other ethnic groups, who are expected that came from other regions, have no equal democratic rights. The regional government itself misses the functional meaning of federalism and subtly implements the principal values of federalism in wrong way. Thus, the regional government considered Oromo people as first citizen and other ethnic groups as second citizens. These wrong ways of exercising the principal values of federalism are also expanded in Afar, Tigray, Somali, Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz, Harari and SNNPE. Therefore, the regional governments practical exercise of federalism under identity-based federal structure are enforced them to accumulate full power to obtain the unconditional rights of secession.

Impacts of Identity-Based Federalism

Apparently, no ethnic group in Ethiopia seems to have smooth relationship and live at peace with its neighbor. All peripheral and central regions remain insecure and have experienced several inter and intra-ethnic violence conflicts. These conflicts are resulted because of identity-based federal structure. For instance, Somali, Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz, Oromia, Amhara, SNNPE, Afar, and Harari regions were affected by inter and intra-regional conflicts. In those regional states, experiences of federalism are exposed them for bloody ethnic conflicts. For example, interethnic conflicts between Oromo and Amhara in 1992 and 1993, Afar and Issa since 2000, the Borana and Garri in 2001, the Karrayu Oromo and Afar in 2002, the Nuer and Anyuaa in 2002, the Ayuua and Majang in 2002, the Anyuaa and the highlanders in 2003, the Oromo and Somali in 2005, the Nyangatom and Kara in 2007, the Majang and highlanders in 2013, and many others. Focused studies of the sources and implications of ethno-politics in Ethiopia by Abbink (1997, 2006), Dereje (2005), Vaughan (2006), Clapham (2004, 2006), and others give substantial data and analysis of the ensuring ethnic conflicts as a result of the TPLF/EPRDF’s ethnic-based federal arrangements.

The immediate causes of ethnic conflicts in present day Ethiopia is the wild competition over power and resources as sense of nationality reach on climax stage. In this regard, the TPLF/EPRDF is the party that was the cause for the unpopular identity-base federal arrangement that could not accommodate diversity and sharing power but only fuel conflicts. Almost all of these multiethnic regions faced interethnic conflicts over a range of issues such as territory, representation and sharing of resources. In some cases ethnic groups seek to separate from the
existing multiethnic regions and from their own ethnic regions for internal secession according to article 47 of the FDRE Constitution.

Therefore, the major impacts of identity-based federalism are affects interethnic social interaction; lose values of social capital; interethnic conflicts; and exposed different ethnic groups for an evil competition over resources, power, materials and representation.

**The Long-run Threats of Identity-based Federalism**

Ethiopia is not the first country in the world to recognize constitutionally the right of secession. “The constitutions of the former Soviet Union and Burma used to contain provisions on secession.” (Duchacek 1970: 219). But none of these countries allowed administrative autonomy let alone a constitutionally mediated secession. In contrast, the dominant trend among federations historically has been to prohibit secession and to use force to clampdown secessionist forces. “The most successful country in the world in federal state structure are Australia, Canada, Switzerland and the United States” (Kincaid, 2011:xxxiii). These countries are formulated their federal state structure based on either identity or geographical settings but none of them recognized unlimited rights of secession under their constitution. Besides, “the USA and Switzerland averted the threat of secession by the use of force” (Burgess 2006: 272).

Recently, Nigeria’s federation stabilized after the defeat of the secessionists of Biafra. The Indian constitution makes clear that the unity of the country cannot be infringed (Stepan 1999: 22). The situation in Canada is slightly different from these broad trends. In its ruling on the question of Quebec’s independence, the Supreme Court of Canada in 1996 neither allowed unilateral secession nor prohibited the prospect of Quebec’s separation.

When we come to Africa, except Ethiopia, secession is condemned. After independence, the consensus in Africa was the inviolability of the colonial boundaries. As explained by Clapham, “the post-1945 international system reinforced the territorial integrity and statehood of African countries” (1996:16). However the Ethiopian situation is different from the prevailing international norms. Hence, the country is not only allowed the secession of Eritrea, but also constitutionalized the unconditional right of secession for any ethnic groups.

The EPRDF is composed of four ethnically defined parties and ruling their own ethnically defined region. They also have their independent ethnically defined institutions, including regional militias and other security forces. The coalition of EPRDF is not deep-rooted and possible to split, not only within

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the coalition but also within a party. For this matter, it is important to remember the splits of TPLF in 2001. Thus, regarding to this coalition and independent regional autonomy, Lyons (2011) states that if central leadership is uncertain, then many powerful regional interests may seek to shore up local control before engaging in power struggles in the center. As such, the threat of Lyons is a possible prediction that the FDRE Constitution gives unlimited rights for regional state to consolidate their power by increasing their source of income and may unleash centrifugal forces will put the unity of Ethiopian state at risk.

The constitutional guarantee is also another source of long-run threats. For instance, the unconditional rights of secession on article 39 encourage the different ethnic-based regional states, which have long-run objectives to establish either independent sovereign state (examples like Oromia, Somali, Gambella, and Tigray) or regional autonomy (like Sidama ethnic group in SNNPE). In line with this understanding, the Ethiopian formula of federal structure is paradox and controversial. This is because it allowed self-determination up to secession in one hand, and preach unity in diversity on the other hand. In this understanding, the long-run threats of identity-based federal structure in Ethiopia are conflict, loss of social capital, national disintegration, secession and antagonistic relation with the cooperation of ethnic line political organizations insurgents like OLF and ONLF.

Alternative Approach for Ethiopian Federal Structure

As I mentioned earlier, federalism is suitable and best alternative state approach for the diverse nature of Ethiopia. However, the arrangement system of federalism needs rational and neutral mind for critical thinking, rather than too ambitious, too optimist, too pessimists and sided in one way. Therefore, the diverse nature and social interaction of Ethiopia should be investigated thoroughly, profoundly, intentionally, and critically to create better arrangement of federalism.

In this understanding, neither the tendency of separation, division, and ethno-political system nor too centralization and cultural dilution with a sense of ethnocentrism is important approach. In this case, the alternative approach is geographical-based federal structure. This system of federal arrangement is emphasized on the geographical settlement of the people regardless of identity background. In this approach, to accommodate diversity and power sharing, the administrative arrangement of each region is depends upon the identity of the majority people who settle in the specific local area. However, everyone will have equal rights to enjoy within a region as well as a
country regardless of language, culture, ethnicity, and other specific identities. Everyone has right to use any language at any place without any restriction until he/she could communicate with the surrounding people. Everyone has also right to preserve, promote, develop and/or protect his/her own language, culture and other identity. Everyone has right to work either in private or public sector in any region without restriction of identity. Generally, in this approach, “identity/nationality” is secondary and “Ethiopian” is a primary identification for everyone. Thus, it focuses on “unity” with respect of “diversity”. The constitution also recognizes ethnic rights and regional autonomy and restricted the unconditional rights of secession by law. In this case, the autonomy of the region is focused on the sense of nation building, equal power to decide on the fate of the nation and evaluated from the perspectives of their contribution capacity for national development.

Conclusion

Ethiopia is a multicultural country but couldn’t develop suitable political structures which accommodate its diverse nature for a long period of time. Since the imperial time, the governments were unable to give attention for the real political problem of the country and fear to confront the reality on the ground. However, post-1991, the political response of the EPRDF seems to ready to challenge the reality and changed the political space from centralization to decentralization. This was the first great step in the political history of Ethiopia.

The EPRDF is applied the federal state in the country to accommodate diversity and power sharing. This political culture is a strong public tool to open our eyes in different direction and easily compared the unitary system with federal system as we know them very well. However, identity-based federal structure has its limitation to accommodate diversity and extremely provide rights for different ethnic groups including unconditional rights of secession. Ethnicity is a sensitive issue to social cleavage and can be major source of civil war. The present ruling party, EPRDF, also subtly and intentionally used it as political instrument to control the political space alone. This identity-based federal structure is exposed people for bloody conflicts among intra and interethnic groups. The people also lose their social integration and develop hostility because of ethno-federal system.

In this case identity-based federal arrangement is created long-run threats that it has potential to devastate and disintegrate the country through unconditional rights of secession. Therefore, to save the country from disintegration, geographical-based federal structure is more suitable and able to fully
accommodate diversity and sharing power than
identity-based federal structure.

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