Ethnic Federalism: A Tool for Managing or a Fuel for Ethnic Conflicts in Ethiopia

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Abstract

The overall objective of this study was to examine the Ethiopia's ethnic based federal experiment whether it has been served as a tool for managing or a fuel for the ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia. After the collapse of the military regime in 1991, EPRDF adopted ethnic federalism since it was supposed to solve Ethiopia's chronic ethnic inequalities generated by the flawed nation building process of the Ethiopian state. However, ethnic federalism since its adoption has had different implications for the country. The project has to be more researched. Therefore, the researcher, by taking the Ethiopia's experiences into account, inspired to examine whether the present ethnically based political formation exacerbates or reduces ethnic conflicts throughout the country. The study used qualitative research methodology and it was based on an explanatory research design. The researcher collected data from secondary sources such as documents produced by EPRDF (the ruling party), opposition parties and from related literatures. The qualitative data was analyzed and interpreted qualitatively using words. All in all, the study concludes that ethnic based federal experiment has failed to manage ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia. It is therefore, recommended that Ethiopia should adopt a territorial federal arrangement to manage inter and intra ethnic conflicts in the country.

Keywords: Federalism, Ethnic-Federalism, Ethnic Conflict, Ethnicity, Ethiopia.

1. Introduction
1.1. Background of the Study

According to Lijphart (2002), federalism advocates self-rule and shared-rule in government arrangement with the division of powers and responsibilities through constitution between the central and regional governments. The philosophy of federalism advocates and maintains the idea that local action in matters of local concern, and national action in matters of wider concern.

The longest lived federal arrangements in the world are experienced in the USA (1789), Switzerland (1848), Canada (1867), and Australia (1901). Despite the success of federal experiments in such countries, federalism in East Europe and other third world countries has failed miserably (Watts, 2008).

Ethiopia is a place to many diverse multiple communities with each having its own unique features. These identities are identified by their unique language, culture (e.g. way of dressing), religion, way of living etc. Diversity is an actual reality that our society is constructed by, considering the fact that the peoples of Ethiopia have had the culture of living together with the right to full measure of self-government, including the right to secession.

Since the downfall of the Dergue regime in 1991, EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Party) adopted ethnic federalism as a means of accommodating and managing the complex ethno linguistic diversity of the country and thereby reduce conflicts. Since its introduction, ethnic based politics and its effects on the country have become a point of discussion and a source of highly intense debate (Gebrehiwet, 2006 and Turton, 2005). The Ethiopian government advocated that the only medicine to save Ethiopia from breakdown is addressing the national question and create Ethiopia where all nations', nationalities' and peoples' identity, language and culture could be equally respected. In addition, the EPRDF leaders claimed that ethnic federalism could facilitate a fertile ground for the various Nation Nationalities to have a say in their own affairs (Aalen, 2006). Cohen (2003) and Kidane (2007), positively viewed ethnic federalism and considered as an important tool in managing ethnic tensions in Ethiopia. Moreover, Kymlicka (2006), Lijphart (2002) and Osaghae (2006), agreed that ethnic federalism gives self-rule to multiple ethnic groups which can in turn reduce secession of regions, hence brings national unity as well as ethnic harmony.

On the contrary, for Egwe (2003), Mamdani (2005) and Nyong'o (2002) ethnic federalism triggers ethnic conflicts, accelerates secession, oppresses individual rghts and eventually leads to the breakdown of countries. According to Mazrui (2004), the ethnic federal arrangement of Ethiopia could be a key cause for the "re-tribalization" of the country. For Ottaway (2007), ethnic-based federalism increases inter-ethnic conflicts rather than minimizing ethnic tensions as well as strives. On top of that, Aalen (2006), Vestal (2009) and Walle (2005), maintained that federalism based on ethnicity is intentionally designed by the EPRDF government to "divide and rule" so as to strengthen its own position.

Since 1991 G.C, ethnic federalism has already been implemented in Ethiopia. Despite the introduction of ethnically based federal structure, currently, owing to many reasons, diversified, complex and serious identity-based conflicts are observed in many parts of Ethiopia. Therefore, this study examines whether ethnic federalism is used as a tool for managing ethnic conflicts or a fuel for these conflicts in Ethiopia.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The July 1991 conference is the first step that facilitated the way for the imposition of ethnic restructuring in Ethiopia. In the conference, the TPLF-led EPRDF argued that the future of Ethiopia lies on establishing a state form which could guarantee self-administration for multiple identities. The transitional period charter which was produced by the conference, made an explicit provision that the right to self-rule up to secession was the unconditional right of the 'nations, nationalities and peoples' of Ethiopia (Article 2, Transitional Charter, 1991). For the EPRDF, the main factors for conflict in Ethiopia were the national and class oppression of nationalities, undemocratic rule and centralization that rejected the rights of the various ethnic groups to use and promote their language, their culture and to determine their affairs.

After the collapse of the military regime in 1991, EPRDF(current Ethiopian government) adopted ethnic federalism since it was supposed to solve Ethiopia's chronic ethnic inequalities generated by the flawed nation building process of the Ethiopian state (Kidane, 2007). The framers of Ethiopian constitution chose ethnically based federal arrangement as the key solution to the historic problems and challenges of the country as well as its peoples, i.e., as a remedy to a century extended suppression and oppression of identities. The Ethiopian government (EPRDF), believed that the only solution that could guarantee the survival of Ethiopia in united and peaceful manner is via the introduction of an ethnic federal system that could provide self-determination, decentralization and constitutionally guaranteed right to secession for every ethnic groups in Ethiopia. However, the ethnic conflicts in various parts of Ethiopia indicated that ethnic federalism has not alleviated ethnic tensions as advocated by the EPRDF (Frank, 2009).

The adoption of ethnic based federalism in Ethiopia by EPRDF has had different implications for the very consequence of the country (Gebrehiwet, 2006). For some, ethnic federalism serves as a means to discourage inter and intra ethnic conflicts in the country, thus encourages the various ethnic groups to live together peacefully. Similarly, a lot of politicians believed that ethnically based federal arrangement is a useful tool to manage ethnic conflicts in multinational societies.

However, for others, ethnic based federalism could lead to breakdown of Ethiopian state since several ethnic groups exert pressure on the government and claims for secession. Ethnic federalism limits the ability of the national government to manage and coordinate the common areas of interest among the states. This fosters and reinforces the political, social, and psychological separation of ethnic groups. As a result, ethnic federalism can go out of hand and may lead the country into never-ending ethnic conflicts and eventually to disintegration like the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia (Aalen, 2002).

The project has to be more researched. Therefore, the researcher, by taking the Ethiopia's experiences into account, inspired to examine whether the present ethnically based political formation exacerbates or reduces ethnic conflicts throughout the country and to provide constructive policy recommendations based on the results of this study.

1.3. Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study is to examine the Ethiopia's ethnic based federal arrangement whether it is used as a tool for managing or a fuel for the ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Primordialism and Instrumentalism theories.

2.1.1. The Primordialism Approach

According to Geertz (2003), the primordial theory holds that ethnicity is closely linked to the primordially existing groups rooted by kinship and biological heritage. For them, primordial attachments and biological features are very crucial in mobilizing ethnic groups. Ethnic communities are extensions of kinship units, basically being derived by kinship or clan ties where the choices of cultural signs (language, religion, traditions) are made exactly to show this biological affinity. Primordialists maintain that certain groups are connected to unique and very close relationships that make a bond from generation to generation with an experience of deeply rooted, intimate and eternal belonging. In this way, the myths of common biological ancestry that are a defining feature of ethnic communities are to be understood as representing actual biological history. Generally, ethnic groups and nations are deeply rooted in human evolutionary psychology. Therefore they are unlikely to be superseded.

2.1.2. The Instrumentalism Approach

Instrumentalists see ethnicity primarily as a socially constructed focal point for the purpose of group mobilization (Brass, 2009). Brass also argued that ethnicity is created by particular political elites and ethnic activists through competition between competing groups for political power, economic benefit and social status within multiethnic category. Markakis (2004) argued that ethnicity has become catalysts for political tensions in various countries due to two objective factors: competition for resources in condition of great scarcity and the role the state plays in controlling the allocation of these resources.

2.2. Understanding Ethnic Federalism

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) introduced ethnic based federalism as a tool to save Ethiopia from disintegration by diverting unending ethic conflict and constant bloodshed that could led to the breakup of the Ethiopian state altogether. For the EPRDF's leadership, therefore, the only solution that could guarantee the continuity of Ethiopia in united and peaceful manner is through the introduction of an ethnically based federal arrangement that could provide self-administration to each Nation and Nationalities in Ethiopia. Thus, ethnic federalism was presented as a choice beyond disintegration or oppression' (Meles Zenawi, 1994: Interview, Efoyita Magazine).

The better alternative to relying on force of arms is the mutual consent of the people to live together (Nahum, 2004). Similarly, a staunch TPLF's advocate argues, 'neither the Amharas and Tigrians nor the Oromos have a monopoly to dominate Ethiopia's political scene on the grounds of dynastic credentials, traditional claims, demographic advantages or the advantage of being better endowed with resources. The less endowed and the small nations also have legitimate rights to participate in its political process, economic life and in the burdensome task of rebuilding it. Thus, in 1991, ethnic federalism was considered as the only option that could save the state collapse.

2.3. Ethnic Federalism and Inter-ethnic Conflicts in Ethiopia

For decades, ethnic based federalism has been deemed as a key tool for reducing inter and intra-ethnic conflict and secessionist tendencies in multicultural societies. However, debates on ethnic federalism reflect two strong contending views.

On the one side, some political scientists argue that ethnic federalism can serve as a means of stabilizing multi-ethnic conflicts. These scholars who are exponents of ethnic based federalism advocate that it is a device for managing ethnic based conflicts than triggering the existing inter-ethnic conflicts and/or generating the new ones. Agnew (2005), for example, believe that ethnic federalism is useful to manage intergroup conflicts that could otherwise escalate into direct physical violence thereby led to the creation of multiple small states without much viability. Similarly, David and Donald (2008) highlighted that ethnically based federal arrangement can play a key role in accommodating and managing political conflicts.

Andreas (2003) summarized that formerly systematically oppressed and marginalized minority groups in Ethiopia are represented at national and state levels. To Horowitz (2005), ethnic Federalism may also be used to overcome inter-ethnic conflicts through power decentralization that in turn enhances inter-ethnic coordination, and alignments based on shared and common areas of interests.

On the other hand, there are pessimistic views about the role of ethnic based federal arrangement in minimizing inter-ethnic conflicts with in multicultural societies. There are many politicians who advocate that ethnic federalism escalates inter-ethnic conflicts (Martinez, 2008). They strongly believed that ethnic federalism, instead of managing ethnic conflicts, leads Ethiopian state into disintegration like the USSR, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia.

3. Research Methodology

In this study, qualitative research method was used because it is effective to explain and understand the documents produced by EPRDF, opposition parties and other related literatures from published journals and websites about the topic under study.

This study was conducted based on an explanatory research design for making a detail explanation about ethnic based federalism and its impacts towards inter and intra ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia. This research design was opted owing to the reason that it enables to connect different ideas and to comprehend the different reasons, causes and their effects.

In this study, since collecting first-hand information from the study area was impossible due to time and financial constraints, only secondary sources of data were employed. To this effect, literatures and documents were used as secondary sources of data.

This study targeted Ethiopia, thus data that has been gathered and analyzed represents from 1991 onwards. Furthermore, due to many obstacles, targeting some other African countries which introduced ethnic federalism was very problematic.

Finally, after the mass of words obtained from various sources have been collected, the qualitative data was analyzed and interpreted qualitatively using words.

4. Findings and Discussion
4.1. The adoption of Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia
The government of Ethiopia and champions of ethnic federalism advocate that federalism has been introduced so as to transform the authoritarian and totalitarian political culture into a democratic state of ethnically based federal arrangement (Alem, 2003). Semahegn (2012), similarly supports this idea by saying that ethnic federalism in Ethiopia able to transform inter and intra -ethnic conflicts into opportunity though it has been facing serious challenges.

According to the EPRDF government, being the second most diversified country in Africa, Ethiopia has adopted ethnic federalism. Since 1991, the Ethiopian government has introduced ethno-linguistic federal political arrangements in order to address the national and land questions of Ethiopian nations and nationalities. A number of politicians argued that ethnic based federal arrangement can be a means to reduce the problems created by inter-ethnic conflicts (Lijphart, 2002). They believed that whereas the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia disintegrated during the same period, Ethiopia came up with new arrangement and continue to maintain its unity and internal integrity.

However, there are various opposing views regarding to the roles of ethnic based federalism in Ethiopia in relation to managing the multi-ethnic tensions in the country. Hence, the Ethiopian ethnic federalism whether it is used as a means to manage ethnic conflicts or escalates such conflicts could be analyzed from the following orientations.

4.2. Ethnic Federalism as a tool for managing ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia
The Ethiopian government argued that ethnic federalism was deliberately designed so as to mitigate the problems of national oppressions and systematic discriminations by the monarchical as well as the military regimes. Accordingly, EPRDF used ethnicity as a tool of ethnic mobilization and regional states formation to minimize inter-ethnic tensions.

Some researchers appreciated ethnic federalism for the reason that it gives a fertile ground for various ethnic groups to administer themselves, in which many Ethiopian nation nationalities have demanded for centuries. Ethnic federalism was very important to address the national question because in the pre-federation of Ethiopia there were Ethno-linguistic domination that oppressed the identities, languages and cultural heritages of the various ethnic groups of Ethiopia. For others, ethnic based federalism in Ethiopia answered the Ethno-nationalist call for self-determination including secession.

According to EPRDF, ethnic federalism is considered as one of the possible ways for resolving multiethnic tensions in Ethiopia. Ethically based federal arrangement is perceived as the only appropriate response to end inter-ethnic conflicts with in multinational states like Ethiopia. For real, the Ethiopian experience shows that ethnic federalism was an effective response to the centuries extended class and national oppressions in the country.

4.3. Ethnic Federalism as a fuel for ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia.
Theoretically, ethnically based federalism is supposed to facilitate a fertile room for political bargaining which in turn accommodates common interests thereby ethnic conflicts can be better managed (Chapman, 2003). Nonetheless, Ethiopian history witnessed that bargaining and compromise were/are unthinkable since all state power rests at the hand of an illegitimate dominant party-EPRDF. Thus, ethnic federalism in Ethiopia failed to open opportunities for managing ethnic conflicts; rather it aggravates intra and inter-ethnic tensions as well as uncertainties in the state.

Some opposition political parties, forwarded that the ethnically based federal arrangement in Ethiopia triggers ethnic conflicts by constructing the "We" and "Others", "Ours" and "Theirs" mentality that eroded the sincere wish to live together in peace with other ethnic groups. This gives a chance for predatory political elites and ethnic activists to mobilize the multiple ethnic groups to march into ethnic based conflicts (Muhabie, 2015).

In addition, the unconditional eight to self-determination and power decentralization enables 'ethnic activists' and 'political entrepreneurs' to facilitate inter and intra ethnic conflicts through provoking historical grievance. Ethnic based federalism motivated a certain groups to establish its own new regions because of inequitable power or resource distribution.

Africa Report (2009) indicated that ethnic based federal arrangement failed to address the national questions since inter and intra ethnic conflicts are deeply rooted and diverted from regional to lower levels of administration. The unhealthy competition and hostility among inter and intra-ethnics have been increasing in an alarming rate with the aim of dominating the minor identities which led to control of national budgets and natural resources.

 Birhanu (2008), witnessed that ethnic based federalism creates atmosphere conducive for ethnic exclusion, stereotyping and hostilities. Birhanu summarized that the Ethiopian ethnic federalism can't accommodate and reflect the common good of the Ethiopia Nation and Nationalities rather it is manipulating so as to meet the egoistic interest of EPRDF through 'divide and rule' policy. As a result, for him, ethnic federalism failed to give response to the national question of Ethiopian people.

Similarly, Keller (2008) concluded that splitting the Ethiopian state into small multiple identities never mitigate the nationality problems, rather aggravates it. Moreover, a lot of literatures and empirical analysis remarked that ethnic based federalism in Ethiopia led the country into fragmentation by provoking ethnic hostilities. As indicated by Brietzke (2005) and Merera (2003), a number of Ethiopians oppose the adoption of ethnic federalism from the very beginning, fearing that it disappear the Ethiopian state from the political map of the world.

5. The consequence of the inclusion of the secession right in FDRE constitution

The secession clause of FDRE constitution is probably the most controversial provision of the constitution. That is why there is no agreement among scholars, politicians as well as the wider public on the significance as well as the impact of this constitutional secession right. Some scholars and politicians emphasizes on the little claimed benefit of the right, while others thoughtlessly opposed the secession right and called for repealing the sub articles as a whole.

However, many reports and journals fabricated by the Ethiopian government advocates that the inclusion of the secession right in the FDRE constitution has its own pros while documents compiled by the opposition parties over weights its cons. As Kreptul in his work (2004), elaborated, in 1998 the other only state that specified secession right in its constitution, St Kitts and Nevis conducted referendum for the separation of two tiny islands. In which majority but less than two-third Nevis voted for secession. So had the states like St Kitts and Nevis constitution put simple majority vote of the people as a requirement to effect secession, Nevis would have been seceded from St Kitts. For Kreptul, it can be easily understood that the requirements set for secession in the constitution are important and should not be underestimated.

The EPRDF maintained that the unconditional right to secession is deemed as the best alternative of accommodating the interests of minority nationalities or diversity and indication of a working federation or democracy. The government also argued that the advantage of including secession right in the FDRE constitution is to wisely deter secession and breakup of the state. That can be only done with the intervention of central government to prevent the secessionist tendency. By doing so, secession can be made more costly and bring the chance of disintegration close to zero. This helps to democratically reduce the chance of ethnic based violence and successfully prevent secession and maintain territorial integrity of a state. In such occasion, the existence of secession right in the constitution is important to sabotage the secession process itself and will contribute to keep the national unity of the country.

On the contrary, documents written by the opposition parties and other relevant literatures witnessed that the secession right granted by the 1995 FDRE constitution has recklessly put simple and easily achievable requirement. By considering this, critics of the constitution argued that it is an invitation for disintegration of Ethiopia. The right to secession should not be treated neither as the best alternative of accommodating diversity nor an indication of a working federation or democracy. Accommodating diversity may not necessarily require the granting of an unconditional right of secession. Because many countries are successful in accommodating the interests of minority nationalities without constitutionally putting the road map of secession and allowing them to secede. For them, problem arises when this right has been applied. So, the effect of the integration of the right to secession results in the disintegration of the state.

6. The Way Forward

Ethnicity is the major or sometimes the only organizing criteria for ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. As Brown (2007, apparently said that ethnic based structure that its sub-national units by ethnic names may a cause for identity troubles. According to Brown, Ethiopia instead of ethnic federalism, should adopt territorial federalism i.e., splitting national territory on the basis of geography and population mix like (Germany, USA, Spain, UK, and Nigeria), states that has been largely benefited from it.

EPRDF believed that Ethnic federalism served as a solution for ethnic conflicts. However, ethnic federalism can't be a panacea to all ailments. Conflicts are bound to be with us always. We can't eradicate them but we, with its weaknesses, can handle, manage or transform ethnic conflicts via ethnic federalism if are happening. It is therefore imperative that procedural, normative, and institutional frameworks should be established for a proper management of inter-ethnic conflicts. According to the opposition political parties, it is not easy to completely discard the ethnic federal arrangement in Ethiopia, as shown by the constant and severe challenges of two major opposing and contending groups. The first group is composed by those who claim more ethnic autonomy and the second group is those who demand the precedence of individual rights over group rights. Therefore, the

opposition political parties like Merera (2003) and other politicians like Martinez (2008) argued that it is advisable to consider both demands in order to map out a hybrid federal model that can tone down the major predicaments of the ethnic federal. For them, the federal model in Ethiopia needs to consider multiple criteria such as geography, socio-economic factors, settlement patterns, population mix and other essential factors in delimiting the regional states. Similarly, documents written by the opposition parties hold that canceling the right to secession from the Ethiopian constitution in order to prevent the country from the state of fragmentation.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations
7.1. Conclusion
From the findings of this study, the following major conclusions were made in line with the objectives.

The Ethiopian government/EPRDF/ introduced ethnic federalism to address the national questions because in the pre-federation of Ethiopia there was ethnic inequalities, civil wars and ethno-nationalist call for self-determination including secession. The core justification behind the Ethiopian ethnic federalism is to facilitate a fertile ground for the various nations and nationalities to have a say in their own affairs with little control from the center or any other dominant group.

Ethnic federalism doesn't solve inter-ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia. Conflicts are occurred here and there among ethnic groups in the country. These conflicts causes for the death of many innocent people, the destruction of property, and the dislocation of many people. Universities have also become the center for ethnic conflicts and are frequently closed due to ethnic clashes. Furthermore, because of ethnic tensions, minorities groups are displaced badly from various regions.

The integration of secession right into the Ethiopian Constitution creates environment conducive for various secessionist ethnic groups. Article 39 of the FDRE constitution allowed multiple ethnic groups to self-administration on the basis of their distinctive ethnic identity. Many secessionist movements have opted for secession from Ethiopia by applying the secession right as if clearly stated Ethiopian Constitution.

The reason why the ethnic-based federalism in Ethiopia seems to fail lies not only in the character of the Ethiopian constitution, outlined along the ethno-linguistic borders, but also in the historical claims and oppositions that the constitution managed to stress.

7.2. Recommendations
Based on the conclusions drawn from the study, the following recommendations were given:
Ethnic based federal arrangement enables the various nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia to administer themselves and promoting their own culture as well as languages. But, it also generates inter-ethnic conflicts provoking the We-ness and They-ness mentality facilitated by political entrepreneurs and ethnic activists. Therefore, it is recommended that a system must be created to make political elites responsible for their devastating actions they contribute at the expense of national unity.

The federal structures in Ethiopia should adopt a territory based political arrangement so as to close the chapter of historical grievances existed for years among the Ethiopian nationalities, instead campaigning on commonly shared values/legacies to promote national unity/ consensus. There should be equitable distribution with in various ethnic groups in Ethiopia, since disparity in sharing of power and wealth among the peoples of the country led to ethnic tensions in the country. Moreover, the study recommends that the Ethiopian government must address the problems of diversity (nationality question) and unfair resource distribution (land question), repressive and ineffective governance, corruption and lack of justice, uneven development which are the primary factors for ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia.

The secession right granted by the 1995 FDRE constitution must be repealed and then replace by consensual secession which is negotiated secession that happens when the constitution never clearly stipulates secession rights. The right to secession should be taken as a last resort if ethnic groups are systematically discriminated by others. Ethiopia has to create a "national public" to overcome conflicts caused by recent constitution and historical claims of various groups. Finally, the study recommends that it is better to re-arrange the ethno-linguistic borders delineated by the constitution, which should be the solution for depoliticizing ethnicity.

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