

The Genesis of Decentralization in Ethiopia: An Overview

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Abstract

Ethiopia in the hitherto periods was characterized as highly decentralized state where the regional or local governments possess much power even some times more than the central government. The central government especially during the Zemen Mesafint or the era of lord was very weak that it was incapable to maintain strong and unified state. Consequently, Ethiopia in that critical period was fragmented and ruled by various local rulers. However, as time goes in the second half of the 19th century, attempts were done to centralized and unified Ethiopia and it was successfully accomplished in the last decade of 19th century and such intense centralization policy was continued until the third quarter of the 20th century.

In spite of this historical fact, currently, Ethiopia undergo a process of far-reaching decentralization, immediately after the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) come in to power in 1991. The nature of decentralization registered in this period was differed from the hitherto one in that it gives for regional governments constitutional guarantee and give unconditional rights to self-determination including the right to secession under Article-39 of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution in order to accommodating ethnic diversity and to avert a century old nationality problems. Besides to this, in the second phase of decentralization the lower tiers of government (districts) are established and constitutionally granted at least at state level. The most imperative objectives of such decentralization are developing grassroots democracy through increasing local participation, enhancing development and, rendering efficient and prompt social services to local people.

Keywords: Decentralization, Regional Government, District Level Government

Introduction

Decentralization in the remote past (in the eighteen and nineteen century)

The origin of Ethiopia as a state traced back to the Axumite period, and even prior to it. As historical and anthropological evidences shown, the existence of Ethiopia as a state was much more prior than Axumite period which accounts not less than three thousand years of history or civilization. Ethiopia since then is one of the few most civilized countries besides Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greek. It had also strong trade relation with Greek, Roman and India (Bahru, 2002; Markakis, 1975; Teshale, 1995; and Tekeste, 2006). Beginning from the period of the Axumite civilization till the second half of 19th century, the political system of Ethiopian was characterized by loose federation and decentralized ruling systems which were manifested in the existence of multiple authorities ruled through hereditary line with local chiefs. The Emperor at the centre had very weak power, while regions such as Gonder, Gojjam, Tigray, Wello, Yeju, Lasta and Showa etc acted as quasi – independent regions in which they were autonomous to have strong army, revenue and judicial powers in their vicinity though they are accountable to the King of kings of the central government. The central government had to recognize the authority of regional hereditary rulers to ensure local acceptance and promote political stability of the empire (Assefa, 2007; Gebre Hiwot, 2013; Gebru, 1991; Teshale, 2002, Zemelak, 2011).

De(centralization) during emperor Tewodros II (1855-1868) and onwards him

Decentralized rule continued to be the central trait of Ethiopia's political system till 1855, critical period when emperor Tewodros II come to power. The central government was so weak that it lost all control over the regional and local authorities during what is known in Ethiopia's history as the 'zemene Mesafint' (*the era of the princes*) which began in the second half of the 18th century and continued until 1855 (Bahiru, 2002). As time goes, in 1855 Emperor Tewodros II began to a process of centralization and territorial expansion with an extensive goal of restoring the unity and dignity of Ethiopia through waging a serious of war with competent regional lords.

In doing so, the Emperor Downwarded the status of local governorship to paid agents of the central government with the aim to break the traditional powers of the lords. His ambitious interest and unreserved efforts to put such objective in to the ground however remain unsuccessful. Both internal and external factors were responsible for such failurity, the stiff resistance of local nobilities and priests, and the expeditions of British force made his gracious goal of centralization program ineffective and shorten the life of the emperor (Bahiru, 2002).

After the death of Emperor Tewodros, his second successor, Yohannes IV took the crown of king of kings of Ethiopia. As far as power decentralization is concerned, he allowed strong local loards namely Menelik II (the later king of kings of Ethiopia after the death of emperor Yohannes IV) and Tekle Haimanote were among

the few whom the emperor grant the traditional title 'king' to administer Showa and Gojjam provinces respectively. As Gebre Hiwot noted, the emperor had continued to grant other title such as *Ras*, and *Dejazmach* to his subordinate regional lords of Wollo, Hamasien (part of Eritrea) and Lasta, who were his subordinate. As a result of lack of formal institutional arrangement, there were no legal division of power between the emperor and the regional lords. In spite of this fact, common division of tasks were there. For instance, the Emperor at the center posses the mandate to defend the sovereignty of the state from external attack; conducting foreign relation and ensuring justice. On the other part, the regional lords had power to levy and collect taxes and pay annual tributes to the emperor; administer local issues; to maintain peace and order of their vicinity; and take strong commitment and action against foreign invasion (Assefa, 2007; Bahiru, 1991, and Gebre Hiwot, 2014). In spite of this fact, king Menelik II, though not official had the capacity to under took foreign relation which further enable him to access weapon and strengthen his military power. But as a result of hostile relation between the emperor and king Menelik, both Menelik and Tekle Haimanote were forced to submit their ultimate authority and pay annual tax to the emperor. Similar to his predecessor, his desire of uniting and centralizing Ethiopia remain ideal as he was defeated and had died at the battle of Metema who fought with Mohadist of Sudan and hence his successor Menelik II took the crown of '*Nigusse Negest*- in Amharic or '*king of kings*'. Immediately after Menelik assume to power, he rushed to realize the above two emperors' objectives of centralization and unification of Ethiopia by employing diplomatic persuasion and forceful measure to incorporate south, east south east territory of the state (Zemelak, 2011; Bahiru, 2002). Hence, he accomplished centralization project proposed by the hitherto regimes and onwards to that his administrative system was characterized by highly centralized one in which the newly incorporated regions were administered via his closer representative, commonly known as '*Balabat*'. However, the ultimate power of the state and important decision were made by the emperor with no or very little power left to regional administrations (Eshatu, Nd; Markakis, 1975).

Decentralization during the Imperial regime

Since the middle of 20th century, Ethiopia had experienced a unitary system of government where the emperor assumed at the apex of the state. The emperor appointed regional leaders who have close allegiance to the emperor in order to handle local issues provided that they paid tributes (Tesfay, 2007:18). Following Emperor Haile Selassie I came to the throne in 1930, he continued to centralized power in his hand using written constitution as an instrument. He had put into operation the most ambitious centralization policy as compared with his antecedent. To that end, the 1931 first written constitution and the 1955 revised constitution serve as a strong weapon for his power consolidation and centralization program (Asmelash, 2000, Tesfay, 2007).

In spite of this fact, as Ethiopian scholars investigate that the emperor attempted three sequences of decentralization. The first decentralization effort was the establishment of municipal governance which was held in 1945. The management roles of municipality were rested on mayor or (*kentiba*- in Amharic) with the following responsibilities and functions: delivery of public health, hygiene, water supply and sewerage services, electricity and street lighting, properties such as land, building, weapons registration, and provision of public services. Moreover, construction of intra-town roads, bridges and squares; slaughter houses; supervision of animal and vehicle traffics; issue of driving and small business licenses; delineation of market areas; provision of welfare services like poor relief, hospitals, asylums, and schools; and approval of plans for private constructions. As far as the financial power is concerned, the municipality were empowered to fix and collect revenue from licenses on trade and professions, use of market place, vehicles and driving license, sanitary charges, land survey and registration fees, advertising, cattle registration); collect rental income tax etc are some of the revenue assignment of municipality councils (Ghebrehiwot, 2014: 16). Of course, these powers were subject to the approval of ministry of interior (ministry of internal affairs).

Ghebrehiwot (2014) further mentioned the failure of the municipality from realizing the stated goals. He pointed out that, the municipalities were not recognized as a distinct level of government, the appointments of Mayors were on the hands of the Emperor which had made the municipal governance undemocratic. The lack of power to determine municipal budget made the municipal government not to meet the intended objectives.

The second decentralization attempt was "Local Education Board" issued by the Proclamation No 94/1947. In doing so, education tax was delegated to the provinces. Through Local Education Board, the Provinces were empowered to determine the establishment of elementary school.

The third decentralization attempted was made by Order No. 43/1966 at Awraja or sub province level in the form of "Awraja self-administration" in 50 selected provinces. An economic criterion was considered during the selection of Awraja to become self- sufficient administrative. The Order allowed the Awraja to have elected council in order to perform some socio economic activities at local level. For instance, the elected council has the power to manage, build, maintain and identify the areas where primary schools, road and health centers are constructed; and conduct economic activities such as trade and agriculture. The Awraja self- administration project however, remained on paper because of failed to pass the bill (Asmelash, 1987; Tegegne, 1998; Meheret, 2002; Ghebrehiwot, 2014; IGE, Order No.43/1966).

As far as revenue power is concerned, Local Education Board has the power to collect revenue from: Land and cattle taxes; education and health taxes; urban land and buildings tax; taxes from trade licenses, professional and vocational activities; charge fees payable for surveying, and registration of real property; revenues from fees for services rendered by the LSA etc. This ambitious Proclamation however remained on paper, as a result of lack of acceptance by the legislative body joint meeting accompanied with little political commitment of the Emperor to give up certain power to local government. Instead, the emperor remained authoritarian that he had committed to implement the centralization and unification plan of his predecessors with the belief that decentralization understood as a threat for the unity of the empire (Ghebrehiwot, 2014).

Decentralization during the Dergue regime (1974-1991)

Immediately after the Dergue regime assumed power in 1974, it took serious of major policy initiatives. The Provisional Military Administration Council (PMAC) introduced the policy of nationalization of rural and urban land and extra urban houses was put in place by issuing proclamation No. 47/1975. Dergue under PMAC and Peoples Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1987-1991) took three actions regarding decentralization of the republic:

The first attempt of decentralization was the establishment of Peasant association (PA) in rural kebele and Urban Dwellers Associations (UDA) in urban areas as lowest local administrative units. Peasant association had the responsibilities to administer local land redistribution, construction of primary school and clinics; provide social justice. The UDA also had similar responsibilities with exception to engage in land redistribution. Although the officials or administrators were elected by the people, they did not act on behalf of the interest of the people but serve as the political arms of the government (Aaron, 2013; Ghebrehiwot, 2014; Meheret, 2002; UN-HABITAT, 2002).

The other unsuccessful decentralization attempts were made in 1987 following the foundation of the Peoples' Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) in order to address the then nationality questions. The regime tried to curtailed and cool down the political pressure through awarding some kind of autonomy to those areas which resist the regime ferociously. Consequently, the Asseb, Eritrea, Ogaden, Dire Dawa and Tigray areas¹, which were characterized as politically unstable areas waging arm struggle either for genuine autonomy or secession were preferred to be autonomous regions (PDRE constitution, 1987). Principally, although, these regions were assumed autonomous, in practice, however, were subordinate to the central government. And they were expected to realize the implementation of centrally draft laws and directives in its respective jurisdiction (Meheret, 2002; Ghebrehiwot, 2014: 22).

It was therefore, clear that decentralization was not the regime's policy priority to devolve power down to the regions, but instead it was the reaction for the then political pressure (the problems of ethnic uprising and political instability). As a result, the Dergue regime was failed to established genuine decentralized government, and was not able to address important issues such as fiscal decentralization and peoples' power to decide their own social and economic affairs. In addition, the regions were compelled to implement the centrally designed policies and directives but had no power to legislate their own law and policies for their own jurisdiction without the permission of the center. Again they are also directly accountable to the center than the people they administer. Moreover, the regime prefer a monolithic authoritarian centralized government with single party-worker party of Ethiopia (WPE- *recognized as the source of all powers, and the owners of the constitution*), shows lack of political commitment to give space for popular participation and to have authentic self-governments, failure to grant significant powers to the regions selected in the one hand and increasing demand of autonomy on the other hand, together intensified nationality grievances and finally it succumb for the demise of the regime from power in 1991 (Alemu, 2011; Meheret, 2002; Negalegn, 2010; Tesfay, 2007; and Tegegne, 1998).

Decentralization Post Dergue regime (1991-till the present)

Unlike the preceded regimes which were characterized as highly centralized government, where the center overwhelmingly control every aspect of government, Ethiopia registered a new lesson and change the old history of the country since 1990s. The Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)², a coalition political force, defeated the Military regime in May 1991; and organized a National Conference for Peace,

¹ In due course of delimiting Autonomous Regions various criteria Such as: ethnicity (distribution and settlement, historical relations of nationalities, language proximity of nationalities, cultural similarities); economic and geographic (population size and resource endowment); level of infrastructural development; degree of urbanization, state farms; and administration efficiency and periphery politics were took in to consideration (Gebre Hiwot, 2014).

² Lists of the four coalition parties of EPRDF are: the Tigray people Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People Democratic Organizations (OPDO), and the Southern People Democratic Organizations (SPDO).

Reconciliation and Democracy, where about twenty-eight political parties were participated (Aaron, 2013; Andreas, 2013; Mulugeta, 2012; Proc. No. 1/1991; and Paulos, 2007). The Participants approved and ratified a transitional period Charter which serves as an interim constitution that laid a base for the foundation of the present federal state structure. The charter gives more emphasis on ethnic group rights as a remedy for past problems, and legalized the right to self-determination for all Ethiopian ethnic groups to preserve its identity. The charter is the first document in its nature in recognizing decentralization as a prerequisite policy alternative for the transition from military dictator to voter based rule. The Ethiopia decentralization process since the 1991, in general encompass two waves. The first wave or phase of decentralization was take place during the transition period (1991-1994), was the devolution of power from the center to the state. Accordingly, it creates fourteen regions. But later, five regions were merge together to form grand region, southern region. The 1995 FDRE constitution divided the country in to nine self-administrative regions and Addis Ababa City Government. The regions were demarcated on the basis of settlement pattern, consent of the people concerned, and language and identity as criteria (Federal Constitution, 1995, Art.4). Accordingly, Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somale, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP), Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella and Harrari national regional states; Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa city governance (Aaron, 2013; Transition government, 1992, proc. No. 9/92; FDRE, 1995, Art.47; and proclamation No. 416/2004)¹.

UN-HABITAT (2002) and Tegegn (1998) noted that, each regional government has substantial powers and authority, including regional constitution, an elected regional assembly, and the right to use and choose its own working language. In addition, every regional state empowered to prepare its own socio-economic development plans, mobilize resources for local and regional development and prepare and implement their own regional budget. A clear division of powers and responsibilities between federal and regional governments are made by the constitution under Article 51 and 52 respectively. Beyond that residual powers (un exhaustively listed powers) are reserved for the states.

The second wave of decentralization, commonly known as “*Woreda or District level decentralization*”², was put in practice since 2002. Regional governments have devolved powers from the region to Zonal (though it has no constitutional base in all regions), Woreda and Kebele levels of governments. The objective of this wave of decentralization is to make the government closer to the people so as to improve service delivery, to have more participatory governance, and to promote economic development at grass root level (UN-HABITAT, 2002:89; Enadwke, 2009). The pace of Woreda decentralization however, was took place in two steps based on wait and see approach. The four regions which are the most populous and relatively developed regions, namely Tigray, Amhara, Oromo and SNNP, as compared to the newly emerged regions, have conducted Woreda level decentralization earlier than the remaining regions aimed at enabling Woredas to take primary responsibility for the delivery of basic services with block grants being given directly to them (Wamai, 2004). And the remaining state and the two urban municipalities (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa) then followed such decentralization process in the succeeding years (Dickovick and Tegegne, 2010; Kassahun and Tegegne, 2004; Meheret, 2007).

Zonal levels of government is found below regional and federal government and above Woreda and kebele administration, in most regional governments are assumed to be an intermediate level of government acting as channels of communication between regional and Woreda and kebele level of governments.

In other words, it has a mere function of directing, supervising and coordinating the actions of Woredas and kebeles governments in due course of implementation of regional determined policies. This function of zonal administration is limited only in those regions which are relatively less diverse in their ethnic composition. But in those regions which are more diversified in their ethnic makeup, for example, Southern SNNPR, zones have been established in such a way that they are separate echelons of governments with elected nationality council aimed at enabling them to play an active administrative role than a mere supervising tasks (Negalegn, 2010:51; UN-HABITAT, 2002; Meheret, 2002).

Conclusion

The historical make up of Ethiopian decentralization process was traced back to the far hitherto regimes. The political system was characterized by highly decentralized as a loose federation where regional governors were strong. In the middle of 18th century during the critical period of Zemene Mesafint or ‘the era of lords’, the power of the emperor at the center was weak which unable to the extent of maintaining national unity and hence Ethiopia was divided and ruled by various regional loards for at least a century until the coming of emperor Tewodros II in to power.

Since Tewodros II assumed power, the Ethiopian divided administration was challenged once and he strongly initiated the policy of centralization and unification of the empire. His noble objective of centralization

¹ Nine member states of the federation as stated under (Art.47) . The constitution however says nothing about Dire Dawa city. But it established later by Proclamation No.416/2004.

² The term ‘*Woreda-in Amharic*’ and ‘*District-in English*’ use interchangeably throughout this thesis.

and unification agenda also had important place by his successor though, it was not successfully realized. This plan however fully realized at the end of 19th century and Ethiopia was characterized by highly centralized administration until the third quarter of 20th century. In these span of period, the making and unmaking of regional governments were highly determined by the interest of the center. For administrative purpose, though the administration is a steady centralized, the emperors tried to create regional and local governments with the main aims to implement central policy. The regional and local governments were agents of the center. As a result, the number of regional governments existed and powers given to them were changed irregularly as per the wish of the emperor.

A de jure form of decentralization was however a recent phenomena. When EPRDF come in to power right after the demise of military government by nationality insurgency, constitutional decentralization to each nation, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia was given. Federal state arrangement with nine regional government and two city administration are formally created and significant political, fiscal and administrative powers are granted to them. Unlike the previous regime, the current regional governments have the rights to established its state structure with legislative, executive and judicial powers. The constitution under art 52 precisely recognized the exclusive powers and functions of regional governments. The constitution act as a guard in the sense that neither echelons of government unilaterally change the constitutional provision without proportional degree of agreement is done by regional governments.

The woreda or District level decentralization was taken place since 2001 by the regional governments. The existence of district level government got constitutional base by the regional constitution and even the federal government constitution allows district level governments to have adequate power under Art.50/4. They have elected council with legislative, executive and judicial (in the form of first instance court) power. The main tasks of district government is render social services such as health, education, road and water supply services, and collect land and agricultural taxes and user fees from the local residents. They have power to prepare and implement annual socio-economic plan as per its local realities.

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