

# Revisiting Ethnic Politics and the Federal System's Conflict Management Capacity in Post-1995 Ethiopia

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## Abstract

*Ethiopia's federal experiment and the political trajectory is key to understanding the worsening ethnic conflicts and its conflict management capacity of the current African State. The country has become one of the fastest growing regional hegemonies in the world. However, Ethiopia has been hit by growing and deadly inter-ethnic conflicts, which begs critical analysis of the underlying historical (colonial politicisation of ethnicity) and the contemporary geopolitical conditions that have affected the democratisation process. Central to this paper, though, is the need to interrogate why the politics of carving out ethnicity has led to such civil unrest in Ethiopia while in other countries such as South Africa and Nigeria, it has not, and to suggest policy ideas in the heated political and policy debate. Comparative literature review is the method of the study. Analysing the Ethiopian experience provides a unique case study as it is a country that has experienced minimal or no colonial annex. The main research question is: Why has the practice of federalism failed in Ethiopia or at least created ethnic divides while in other African countries such as South Africa, it has not. To this end, the author also considered: Ethiopian People's Democratic Front's (EPRDF) post-1995 statehood and state-building project that has established a de facto developmental state approach; the primacy claims of class versus ethnicity questions; and the ethnicity politics in Ethiopia that seems to have reversed some of the gains achieved by the 1995 Federal Constitution. The paper argued that the brief period in which Ethiopia stayed Italy's colony had little to do with the ethnicisation of politics and the current ethnic tension in Ethiopia, which is rather the result of the heightened rhetoric of pre-1991 Ethiopia as 'a prison of ethnicities' and politicisation of ethnicity is found to bear on the problems in the conflict management through federal arrangement. Overall, the finding indicated that the politicisation of ethnicity in Ethiopia continues to negatively impact on the social contract and threatens it with an eminent Balkan-style split.*

**Keywords:** colonialism, nationalist movements, ethnic politics, federalism, political transition, Ethiopia



## Introduction

In 1991, Ethiopians made their biggest leap of faith in their history of modern government to establish a democratic government and governance (Assefa, 2006). Unlike its predecessors, the 1991 Transitional Government (TFG) of Ethiopia, which later established the 1995 Federal Constitution and Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), sought to establish the government of many Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (NNP) (cf. Vestal, 1999, p. 84). The constitution declared Ethiopia to be synonymous with the NNP that constituted it, and this was also meant to redress past oppressions experienced by these groups (Assefa, 2006). In addition, the leaders of the transition to the new constitutional order claimed to have altered the eminent disintegration that faced the country, as there were over 17 separatist groups fighting the Dergue<sup>1</sup> regime. These included: The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), etc. Indeed, researchers and politicians alike agree that the transitional government created a chance for ethnic groups' recognition, self-rule and a hope for the creation of a common social, political and economic community. Since then, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a party comprising four ethnically organised fronts and parties, namely the Tigran People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and the South Ethiopian People's Democratic Front (SEPDF), emerged into the political scene. EPRDF then established the transitional charter, which became the basis for the 1995 constitution (Vestal, 1999:84). The true motive behind the current federal state system has been the subject of both academic and political speculation: the scholars who articulated the national domination thesis and who forged the current federal state argued that national domination was the major challenge, while the second group argued for the existence of class oppression, which they thought was more genuine than the ethnic oppression thesis (cf. Aalen, 2002; Young, 2006).

Despite the hope for a lasting solution with the federal remaking of the state, the political practice for the last 25 years has been linked to the politicisation of ethnicities, conflict and other sociopolitical ramifications (Young, 2006; Zahoric, 2011). The country has been experiencing the rise in ethnically motivated attacks and inter-ethnic conflicts that have also come to threaten the very continuity of the state itself (cf. Taye, 2017; Abbink, 2011). According to the Adrian Blomfield, (2019) Ethiopia is currently facing the risk of a violent Balkan-style split<sup>2</sup>.

The reasons behind the rise of these ethnic conflicts are multiple – the combination of parallel, political, economic and ethnic and land governance policies and practices are said to be behind the generation of conflicts (cf. Taye, 2017; Abbink, 2011). For most of the contemporary political

1. Dergue is the military junta that ruled over Ethiopia for 17 years from 1967 up to 1991, toppling the Haile Selassie regime.
2. Blomfield, A. (30 June 2019). Warnings over 'Africa's Yugoslavia' as Ethiopia Coup Attempt Heightens Risk of Violent Balkan-style split. [https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/06/30/warnings-africas-yugoslavia-ethiopia-coup-attempt-heightens/?fbclid=IwAR15vPDYdnwzhPak\\_Sf2vrlmvtobGiGAX1P1qQNVISmKzGbwU1TcRulodlA](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/06/30/warnings-africas-yugoslavia-ethiopia-coup-attempt-heightens/?fbclid=IwAR15vPDYdnwzhPak_Sf2vrlmvtobGiGAX1P1qQNVISmKzGbwU1TcRulodlA)

history of Ethiopia, the people in the political and geographical South<sup>3</sup> have been systematically excluded from making up a government correspondent to their size (cf. Zahoric, 2009; Taye, 2017). The 21 years of EPRDF's rule showed that the dominant Ethiopian ruling elite has been centred around the Tigray political class, manipulating the ethnic federal system to control the most important state's executive apparatus, including the military and political powers, as well as monopolise the economy through party-owned business (cf. Abbink, 2011; Waal, 2015).

The political-economic experiences of the last six years following the death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi Asres on 20 August 2012 and the emergence of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegne to EPRDF's leadership in the same year, witnessed the emergence of deep centre-periphery cleavage. In this regard, former Prime Minister Hailemariam recently suggested in an interview that, "Since Meles, there has been a fierce power struggle within the party, between those who considered the TPLF [Tigryan People's Liberation Front] to be the dominant party and those in the other three parties which wanted to end this dominance<sup>4</sup>" (Greg 2018, p. 1). Haile-Mariam added that he was challenged whenever he brought new reforms before the EPRDF, and that changes were always undermined by the TPLF, who felt that they owned the existing order (Greg 2018). The former Prime Minister's responses are testament to the political crisis the country is in.

These experiences led to the deepening of social and political grievances across the country. Researchers Gudina (2004) and Zahoric (2011) concluded that the post-1991 government attempts at democratic political transition failed. Moreover, Zahoric argued that "Ethiopia's politics can be characterised as being based on clientelism, nepotism, ethnic favouritism and the use of repressive methods" (Zahoric, 2009, p. 258). Thus, he suggested that the federal state system has been behind the (re)emergence of divisive political practice within the country's political economy. More recently, the historic election in the year 2005 presented the second opportunity at democratic political transition through the democratic election process for the first time after the 1991 government change (Tronvoll, 2011; Gilkes, 2015). However, the government displayed a major retreat in its political will for democratic change and systematically rolled back the lost votes. In the following years, it enacted several restrictive laws, most notably the civil society and anti-terrorist laws, which are used to control and crush any dissent against the state (Tronvoll, 2011). The recent student protests and various socio-political demands in the society (mainly in Oromia) marked the third and current attempts at political transition in Ethiopia. The movement #Oromo protest began as a protest to the Addis Ababa expansion master plan, however, it marked the increase of Oromo protest, demands for wider sociopolitical rights and more recently, the rise of

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3. These ethnic group are largely grouped outside of the 'Amhara and Tigray' ethnic groups. Historically, these areas and people were not part of the nation building.
  4. Mills, G. (2018). Ethiopia's Need for 'Deep Renewal'. Accessed on 28 August 2018. <http://www.thebrenthurstfoundation.org/article/ethiopia-s-need-for-deep-renewal/>



persistent inter-ethnic hostilities, which continue to infringe on citizens' right to move, work and live in all regions of the country (Adimassu, 2013).

These unresolved dichotomies of constitutional and nation building approaches continue to derail the development and security of its people (Gudina, 2004; Young 2006). Moreover, the government views the recent mounting protest as the result of its economic and political development efforts, "because it has created demanding and questioning citizens" while the protesting youth and opposition activists argue that it is related to the disagreements in the nation-building strategy, and broader political-democratic deficit. The country constitutes people with diverse political social and historical experience, for example, SNNP consists of more than 56 diverse ethnic and linguistic groups. Similarly, the Oromo people consist of the largest single ethnic group in the horn of Africa. The ever ethnicised political machinery in the country have created and fuel social cleavage. This, in turn, brought about the continuation of political economic dichotomies and the re-emergence of the nationality questions, which defied whatever economic progress that had been achieved. EPRDF imported and attempted the implementation of ideologies like developmental state policy, which is indirectly contrary to the sociopolitical realities that have pre-existed or come with the post-1991 political experiments like revolutionary democracy, the primacy of ethnic federalism and State's land ownership, etc. These changes have been equally a source of positive economic change and ongoing sociopolitical turmoil across the nation (Adimassu, 2013). For Abbink, the developmental state policy approach in Ethiopia has led to rather contested governance, uneven and unbalanced economic development, which is against the principle of federalism and has excluded most of its people, which is also responsible for the growing popular discontent in the nation (Abbink, 2012). The economic and political imbalance has been largely felt among the youth, leading into outbursts of violent protests and attacks on ethnic-cultural groups.

The Ethiopian developmental state policy, which is the brainchild of late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, envisioned a developed and economically self-sufficient Ethiopia, like that of East Asian economies (De Waal, 2012). More importantly, the developmental state policy underlines the need for the government to make maximum use of the country's (land) resource, which it claims is the only source of capital. This constitutional move has created policy governance contradictions in various regions, particularly in the political peripheries (Abbink, 2012). On the one hand, the constitutional architects claim that the society is largely made up of peasants and that land should be free for them, while increasingly dispossessing land through large-scale land investments and urban expansion plans (Gebresenbet, 2016). More importantly, the ethnic politics coupled with a long history of mistrust in state-society relations has been defining aspects of the recent conflict across the nation. This also vindicates the problematic implementation of the political system and the political narrative is becoming more damaging and fatal for the country in many ways.

This article attempts to show the link between ethnic politics and the emergent inter-ethnic conflicts within the broader perspective of the current political transition and to find answers to the root causes of ethnic violence in Ethiopia. The focus of the discussion here would be in relation



to the practical conflict management capacity of the federal system in the light of contemporary inter-ethnic conflicts. The paper has also attempted to reflect on the struggle among groups to define the current political transition in Ethiopia. Besides, this political transition has already begun to impact on the region's security, initiating a peace process with Eritrea, Egypt and Ethiopia as a major actor in south Sudan's long overdue peace process. Research on ethnic conflict within the Ethiopian federalism is not new (Zahorik, 2008). However, there are relatively few accounts and analyses attempting to revisit the conflict management capacity and experiences in federal Ethiopia. Moreover, the emerging forms of ethnic violence, even in those traditionally peaceful communities, would have far reaching national, regional and international implications.

## Theoretical and Empirical Discussions

The emergence of federalism as an ideology within the African political space has been linked with the wide perception that it would provide for a government that can respond to both separatist and unionist aspirations within the same territory (cf. Alemante, 2003; Zahorik, 2008). In other words, it is believed that this state system would allow for corporate governance among autonomous sub-national units with decentralised power. This could, indeed, allow for the establishment of the government of equals and the chance for negotiation of power with the central government (Alemante, 2003, p.85). Socially, federalism promotes the values of 'unity in diversity' or provides a balance between 'shared rule and self-rule' (Watts, 2008, p.1).

Unfortunately, much of the experience with the experimentation in federalism in Africa has been short-lived (cf. Congo (1960-1965), Kenya (1963-1965), Uganda (1962-1966), Mali (1959) and Cameroon (1961-1972). These are some of the countries forced to change their state structures because of instability and persistent secession traits because of a failure to match their federal arrangement (Erk 2014; Alemante 2000). The only remaining African countries experimenting with this ideology are three, namely: South Africa and Nigeria, and Ethiopia as the third. Hence, many countries in the continent that attempted to implement federalism especially in the sub-Saharan region, have discontinued or ignored the ideology because of the fatal pitfall it may threaten. The accounts from these countries showed that they have faced critical challenges in terms of suiting federalism to their local reality (Lancaster, 2012). This is because of the fluidity of identity (for example, long history of intermarriage) and absence of clear-cut boundaries to African identity, which have been the most important factor challenging the success of these experiments. These realities also clearly demonstrate that, no matter the terrain of geographical settlement or the pattern of interaction and economic involvement, it is very hard, if not impossible, to define or form borders for identities in Africa (Berman, 2010, p. 2).

Confirming this reality (fluidity of identity), Nigeria and South Africa have chosen to systematically deal with ethnicity within their country's political and economic space. Nigerian federalism priorities the sovereignty of the territorial unity of the country in which the ethnic group resides and moves on to establishing a structure that does not allow a single ethnic group to claim a geographical area (for distinct ownership). This constitutional plan has reduced the possibility of hostility among



differing groups and claims to the Nigerian territory by a specific group (Alemante, 2003, p. 100).

Most importantly, the constitution potentially delegitimises groups' special interests over resources like oil in some regions, detaching certain ethnic groups from their ancestral land, which might backfire like it did in Nigeria. However, the South African constitutional architecture has established additional schemes of redress and protection while it rejects exclusive/special autonomy based on ethnicity, hence the organisation of power is based on the principle of balancing economic and political arrangements (Alemante, 2003).

Ethiopia has been experimenting with a rather unusual form of federalism since 1991. The Ethiopian model is known for its overemphasis on the difference and/or diversity of ethnicities and it bestowed the ultimate sovereignty and territorialised these groups (establishing regions along major ethnic lines) with explicit constitutional statement of the right to succession, Article (39) (EPRDF, 1995). Generally, looking at the Ethiopian federal architecture and practice, it has extensive and explicit focus on ethno-linguistic structures, both for its regionalisation and decentralisation of power and autonomy (Alemante, 2003, p. 78). Understanding the historical/colonial legacy of ethnicity in Africa and particularly in Ethiopia along with the contemporary geopolitical reality, provides a better ground to analyse their impact on ethnic politicisation. Italy colonised Ethiopia for a very brief period from 1936-1941 (Ahmed, 2000, p. 147-159).

The Italians utilised the ethnic, religious and linguistic divide that had existed long before their arrival to materialise their policy of 'Divide and Rule' to reinforce their grip on the east African region, including Somalia, Eritrea and the Continent in general. The Fascist Italian invaders were well aware of the era of Zemene Mesafent and the regionalisation in the country. Unlike most part of colonised Africa where colonisers needed to install European elements of difference, in Ethiopia, Italians needed only to reinforce the existing divide. Hence, the colonial experience had little impact in Ethiopia compared to what the apartheid experience did in South Africa and the Belgium favoritism in Rwanda. This paper argues that, in the context of the contemporary ethnicisation of politics in Ethiopia, the eras of King Minelik the II, King Haile-Selasse and the post 1966/1997 student-led nationalist movements have a lot to do with the emergent conflicts in Ethiopia. Most importantly, the then Addis Ababa University students who led the 17-year struggle against the dictator Mengistu Hailemariam were highly influenced by the readings of the Marxist-Leninist thesis of the existence of a dominant ethnic group. The students who came from the peripheries – mainly from Tigray – applied the thesis to Ethiopia and argued that the Amhara Ethnic group was favoured for centuries before, including by Haile-Selasse and the military Dergue. Unlike most modern African states that are threatened by ethnic politics, the Ethiopian challenge emerges from this political struggle history. In a similar way, it has the same challenges as other countries on the Continent where ethnic groups also struggle to emerge from the colonial mentality that created political borders. Generally, Ethiopians like to remember this period as the invasion period rather than colonial annexation.

Scholars in federalism study and politicians alike have repetitively warned of the consequence of such an extensive focus on ethnicity; in Ethiopia, which could create ethnic chauvinism and



violence (cf. Erk and Anderson, 2009; Abbink, 2012, Kibreab, 2017). As it has been witnessed in the past 27 years, and more increasingly in the last decades, the fear was not just a nightmare but one that has materialised into several ethnicity-based clashes and ethnically motivated attacks. Moreover, the emergent ethno-nationalism has exacerbated what used to be community clashes into clan-tribal clashes (Bekalu, 2017). Considering such challenges of having a federal state structure with a focus on ethnicity, countries have been improvising the system to promote the security and welfare of their society. For example, the Federal Republic of Switzerland has a policy that discourages the development of nationalism along linguistic or ethnic lines (Alemante 2003:101). Similarly, there are countries that prohibit party or political origination along ethnic and tribal difference, for example, in Ghana, the Constitution, under (Article 55:4), has stipulated that political parties shall not organise based on identity. In general, the centuries of experience of civil war and conflict in various states around the world, even in countries with the most 'philosophically and legally' sophisticated federal system like that of the United States of America, demonstrates the power of identity to cause spiraling security and unity problems if not properly governed and used (Alemante 2003).

The scholarship in the area has underlined the 'natural linkage' between identity politics and the emergence of ethnic conflict, and it has mainly owed the challenges to the 'nature of the African society', i.e. its diversity and fluidity at the same time (Alemante 2003). Thus, the political (constitutional) and policy translations have also contributed to the (re)emergence of ethnic conflicts, including Ethiopia. In other words, federalism as an ideology or ethnicity as a social construct (continued object of self-development) may not be the factor that effectuated the emergent conflicts. In this regard, literature has generally underlined three perspectives in their analysis of ethnicity and conflict nexus, i.e. the primordialism, instrumentalist and constructivist perspectives. In line with the primordialism perspectives, the views of Geertz (1973) and Horowitz (1985) are useful to understand the core of the argument. For Geertz (1973, p.263), ethnicity refers to the shared identity and relationships, based on assumed blood ties, and language, religion and culture. Similarly, Horowitz (1985, p. 51-52) has also claimed that "... ethnicity is connected to birth and blood, but not absolutely so". Looking at these arguments, both expressions focus on some kind of 'ancestral 'connection'. The primordialism view generally regards ethnic identity as given and immutable, (Geertz, 1973:261; Horowitz, 1987:52). The instrumentalists have a different look at ethnicity, in which they view it as an instrument of elite manipulation for political-economic gain. The third perspective on ethnicity is the political economy approach, which is dominantly known to us the 'constructivists view'. They build their view of ethnicity and ethnic conflict based on the analysis of historical sociopolitical relations, i.e. focusing on the political-economic factors in addition to identity-claim of common ancestry (cf. Easterly and Levine 1997; Braathen *et al.* 2000; Horowitz 1985). Hence, identity is but one factor causing conflict and impacting the ethnic relation.

The 'greed-grievance' theoretical explanations provided by Murshed and Tadjoeeddin (2009) have also shortcomings in the face of the contemporary realities of ethnicity conflicts' dual relation, i.e. the forced removal of citizens from differing communities across the country. More so, the



Sidama-Wollieta, Guji-Gedio, Oromo-Somali communities have coexisted peacefully for centuries, which makes the resource scarcity and increased social mobility argument rather simplistic. Political analysts (cf. Erk and Anderson, 2009) have long argued that ethnicity serves to nurture the perception of bias and neglect against the ethnic group, i.e. the 'grievance' that potentially could transform into conflict or remain as a source of discontent. The underlining argument, however, is "identity alone as insufficient to cause violent conflict".

The contemporary federal practice in Ethiopia presents a paradox of relative economic growth, existing social mobilisation and increased communal violence and anti-government protests. Generally, ethnic federalism in Ethiopia does not consider the fluidity of identity and existing voluntary social mobilisation within delimited geographical areas (Assefa, 2006, p.135). The increased protest, on the other hand, depicts broader political, democratic and governance challenges in addition to the structural wealth redistribution question. Since roughly May 2018, the emergence to power of reformist group (young OPDO members) from within EPRDF, following years of violence and popular demand, has created a very dynamic political scenario, i.e. a growing hope for the Follee and Qerroo (Oromo youth) for equal citizenship and democracy, attempts by ethnicities to keep the gains of federalism and assert their role in the polity and desperate attempts to shape the transition (Amhara elites), and attempts to reassert power on the part of power elites who are on the losing end. These occurrences have also reinforced the doubtful political speculation on the reality of democratic and peaceful power transition within EPRDF.

## **Emerging Ethnic Conflicts, Causes and Consequences in Ethiopia**

Ethnically motivated attacks and conflicts that amount to an ethnic cleansing are currently boiling up in the country – in Oromia, SNNP and Gambelia and Amhara (Abbink 2012). The Ethiopian Human Right Conference (HRCO) in 2018; International Human Rights Watch (2018); Amnesty International (2018), organisations and many other human right institutions have reported that the horrific reality of massive displacement and killing across the county. The estimate of the internally displaced have reached 2.8 million and the data shows that these groups have been targeted and attacked because of their ethnicity. Ethnic group members living outside of their ethnically designated geographical limits are being targeted and attacked.

One such conflict that has continued to be at the centre of the country's new constitutional and political anomaly is the one between the Oromo and peoples of the Ethiopian-Somali region that occurred in June 2018. The conflict occurred along some major cross-border trading areas of Aweday, East Harrerge and other areas found within the newly constituted Ethiopian-Somali region. The conflict has led to the death of hundreds and the displacement of over a million Oromo ethnic group members from the Ethiopian Somali region (Amnesty International 2018). Clearly, the emergent ethnic attack on the largely Oromo ethnic group was unprecedented, as people have shared the trading route/resources in the area and lived together for centuries. Moreover, the two people shared the same language, religion and other cultural values due to the long





history of intermarriages and social interactions. The government has suggested that the source of the conflict has been competition to control the trade route between the two people. However, opposition political groups and empirical data suggest the involvement of ethnic politics and ethnic entrepreneurs who want to instigate the conflict to facilitate their contraband trade, push the Oromos' out and revitalise their political cause. The paper argues that a mix of both political aspirations and economic motives are causing the conflict and more importantly state capture, which played a huge role in creating a conducive environment for the conflict to flare up.

The Southern region is home to over 56 ethnic groups, with a long history of common existence. With the new regionalisation, researchers have constantly cautioned the government of Ethiopia of a growing unhealthy power competition. It cannot be denied that the constitution's ethnic and cultural recognition principle have created a mantra of 'Unity in Diversity', a narrative of tolerance and respect among nations and nationalities. However, the overemphasis on ethnicity in relation to citizenship and governance matters has brought these fatal effects on the country (cf. Aalen, 2002; Legesse 2015). In addition, the recent conflicts (as of June 2018) in SNNP are, however, manifestations of the broader State's fragility infused by the ethnic politics. There exists large documented conflicts in the SNNP that took place over the past two or three decades; of ethnic federal experiments (cf. Asnake, 2012; Holder *et al.* 2006). The major causes of these recurring conflicts are suggested to be the unhealthy competition for regional hegemony and of who controls what (power and territory), i.e. for the controlling position in the regional state power structure and to dominate resources, including the regional capital city of Hawasa.

Examples of the most enduring conflicts causing the death and displacement of millions every now and then for the past two or three decades include The Sidama question: to secure the status of a regional state has been unfolding into major ethnic conflict between the Sidama and Wolaita ethnic groups. The two groups fought a major war between the years 2000-2002 (Asnake, 2014). However, over the last months, the conflict has been the source of the worst humanitarian crisis in the country in nearly three decades of its federal existence. The Konso people question: to raise their Woreda status to Zonal administration, has caused major regional crises that caused the closure of public service bureaus for months between the years 2015-2016. The Silte's request to constitute a regional state of their own, breaking from the Gurage Zone, has also been a major source of ethnic tensions and violence between Silte and Gurage people over the years.

Furthermore, the more recent boiling conflicts in Ethiopia have caused the displacement of more than 800 000 people from the West Guji Zone of Oromia Regional State and Gedeo Zone of SNNPR. According to Amnesty International, at least another 20 people were killed in the violence between the Gedeo and Guji communities (Amnesty International, 2018). The Gedeo-Gujji Oromo people's conflict, which is still ongoing as one of the most destructive ethnic conflicts in SNNP, and the Gurage's question for separate regional administration in addition to the already existing Silte people's demand for independence, showcase the fragile situation in the country.

The highlanders (Amhara, Tigray and other people in the north) are constantly under attack in mainly the southern and western lowland regions of Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Oromia and



SNNP. Major displacements of Amhara ethnic members from the SNNRP region were documented in the year 2013. The attack and forced removal followed the regional government's claim of deforestation by the migrant settlers. Several forced removals from different parts of the region are now emerging in the face of new political dynamics. In Gambella, the Nuer and the Anwak peoples (indigenous to the region), have fought for regional hegemony. Recently, in July 2018, an ethnic-motivated attack in Assosa-the regional capital of Gambella claimed the lives of over 10 people. Throughout what is known to us as the 'Oromo protest' in the past decade (2014 to date), there were documented ethnic conflicts directed against the 'other' (Taye 2017). Recently, in the Amhara region, members of the Tigran ethnic group living in Kemisse, Batti and other Amhara regional areas were attacked, their properties were destroyed, they were forcefully removed from their land, and there are also constant conflicts among pastoralist communities of the adjacent Somali and Afar peoples in the country. Generally, it is argued here that ethnic politics has led to the development of territorial nationalism in addition to the ethnic nationalism that deprives the development of a balanced civic nationalism (Abbink 2006:388). Furthermore, a host of factors like the democratic deficit and the solo developmental state's effort at pushing the economy to grow has been a source of rejection to the positive gains of the federal system.

### **Displacements and Anti-government Protests**

In Oromia, 'other' ethnic group members are under constant attack and persecution because of their ethnicity. One resident told Haben Fecadu, an Amnesty International Campaigner, "It is no longer tenable to continue living here; we are afraid for the lives of our children". The villager also added that, "despite the community filing numerous reports and complaints to District and Zonal authorities in Oromia State about the ongoing attacks, the authorities had not addressed the violence" (Haben, 2019, P. 1). Why is there confusion between attacking other ethnic group members and anti-government protests? This is one essential question that needs to be analysed in the face of growing animosity among the Ethiopian people. The ethnic federal architecture of the state has created ethnic political, economic, and social-relational understanding among the people. This has created legitimacy challenges to the federal government in various ways. Despite the existing limited constitutional avenues of dealing with such conflicts, which are also discussed on preceding pages, both the federal and regional government are seen as weak and unable to deter or respond to the flaring violence and the massive devastation. Ethnic conflict does not respect or protect ethnic rights, rather it politicises identity in various ways. Thus, ethnic federalism has also proven challenging for the democratic and peaceful protest of the people.

Since the transitional period to an ethnic federal state structure, the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) dominated the EPRDF. Such party dominance in countries like Ethiopia could cripple conflict management capacities of ethnic federalism, (Vestal, 1999; Dickovick, 2014). In Ethiopia, it has resulted in the unbalance between the shared rule and self-rule principles of the federalism, moreover, it contradicts the equality and equal power-sharing among all nationalities and people's principles in the constitution. The popular tendency to justify the attacks on innocent Tigran's



ethnic nationals who live and work in various parts of the country are then blamed on the power dominance of their ethnic brethren. Recently, the Prime Minister was speaking in the parliament regarding the misconception in everyday life about the Tigray people, "...the people in Tigray are very poor who can't even afford to get clean tap water, the people have not benefited any higher from the system..." (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, 2018 ). These also show social narratives in Oromia and other regions about the Tigray, which are used to justify violence against members of the Tigray ethnic group. The point here is that the ethnic federal system has fused state-society and inter-societal relations to such an extent that anti-government protests, displacement and attacks on innocent civilians cannot be separated (Human Rights Council, 2018).

In a nutshell, ethnic politics have now gone to the extreme without a proper conflict management strategy within the federal state system. In this regard, Amnesty International reported that, "Ethiopia's new government has been making great strides to improve human rights in the country, but the pattern of ethnically-motivated violent attacks and displacement are being shamefully ignored. They must be protected from further attacks, and those already displaced must be provided with adequate alternative accommodation" (Amnesty international, 2018). Thus, even though federalism has brought multiple changes, with the current political uncertainty, security crisis and challenges, it may lead to disintegration.

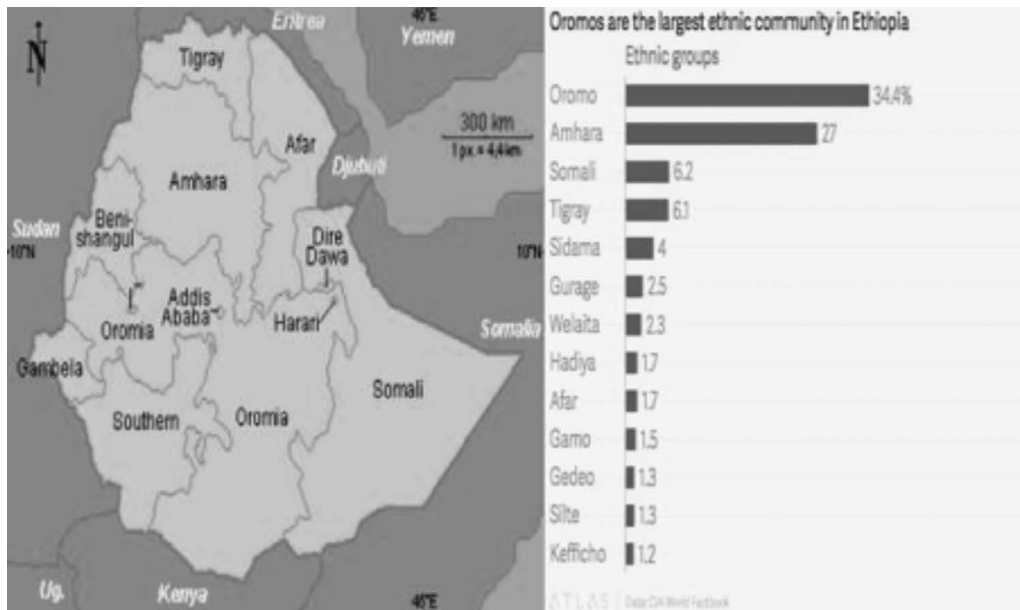
## **Conflict Management Capabilities and Experiences in Ethiopia's Ethnic Federalism**

The 1995 constitution has established the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), and decentralised power to regions along ethno-linguistic lines. There exists clear constitutional framework regarding self-administration for various ethnic groups and dealing with and managing conflict in Ethiopia. The first among these major futures of the constitution "with the intention to deter possible civil war" is Article (39). The article recognises ethnically organised regions to an "unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession"; it also states their cultural rights – to develop, promote and preserve their history. However, these constitutional pillars, including the right to 'self-determination within zones and regions have rarely been practiced (cf. Tewfik, 2010; Adegehe, 2009). As a result, separatist groups, the likes of OLF and ONLF, have justified their resort to violence.

Thus, the state has neither broadened the democratic space for the demand to be peacefully entertained nor removed it from the constitution. Moreover, many scholars and politicians alike (Adegehe, 2009); Kibreab, 2017) argue that the article has resulted in an unhealthy competition among ethno-linguistic groups who seek to aggrandise their share of the national cake (Taye, 2017, P.13). In principle, the 1995 constitution established equitable representation of the people at both the regional and federal levels of government. For example, 54(3) declared for 20 seats in the House of People's Representative (HPR) to be reserved for minorities; article 61(2) stated that every NNP shall be represented by at least one member and additional representative for each



one million additional population. Besides, 100 000 people are believed to be represented by one representative in the HPR. However, the actual practice deviates from the mentioned principles, regional asymmetry has been part of the experiment (Aalen, 2002) In Ethiopia there are nine regional states and two city administrations (See picture 1 below).



Source: *ethiopress.com*

As it can be seen from the figure above, the federal state has asymmetric regions, with dissimilar constituent parts, i.e. the lack of correspondence between the ethnic federalism and the objective facts such as population size (Aalen, 2002, p. 66). This dissimilarity in size, coupled with various inequalities in professional-political bureaucratic arrangement and resource distribution, are factors that have been fuelling the recent inter-ethnic tension and conflict. This has been the case mainly in (SNNP) and Oromia. In SNNP, the federal design has been a source of competition between ethnic groups for regional hegemony, which led to recurrent attacks and violence. Articles 51 and 52 of the FDRE 1995 Constitution are also dedicated to stating the powers and functions of states and the federal government within the polity. In principle, the power and function of the federal government, stated under Article (51), are far broader – encompassing local constitutional matters to global and regional issues. Surprisingly, ‘protection of the federal constitution’ is an explicitly stated responsibility of the federal government, as far as broader, national level responsibility is concerned.

5. EBC co-organised training by the PM Dr Aby Ahmed to various executives in the country (22-26 August 2018).

Recent experiences of the federal government efforts at discharging its development and peace ensuring responsibility (conflict management) show that regional governments have been highly uncooperative. A case in point is the 2014/2015 Addis Ababa Expansion master plan, which was dropped because of opposition from various youth groups and mainly from the Oromia regional government. In addition, the federal government's role as neutral peacemaker has been doubted in the face of inter-regional ethnic conflict between the Ethio-Somali region and Oromia regional state<sup>6</sup>. According to the Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia (AHRE), "thousands of civilians are also displaced from the regions because of their ethnicity" (UNICEF, 2018, Crisis Group, 2017, 2018).

The Heads of the two regions recently gave conflicting accounts regarding the cause of the incident, one accusing the other. This is the current reality in Ethiopia between regions. The constitutional decrees in the Ethiopian ethnic federal experiment in relation to holding government accountable for the protection and right of other ethnic group members residing in their regions are very few (cf. FDRE Constitution art. 12;1, 2, & 3; art. 48; 1, 2 & 3), which mainly focus on the federal government's role and the federal arrangement. Thus, there exists very few constitutional decrees that explicitly provide for holding regional governments accountable for conflicts, inter-ethnic relations and that require bold measures or responses to conflicts. Despite such practical challenges, the constitution and the federal experiment has improved peoples' right to self-administration and socio-cultural development.

There are also lists of constitutional decrees that are meant to prevent and/or manage conflicts. For example, Article 88 (sub article 2) states that "Government shall have the duty to strengthen ties of equality, unity and fraternity" among nations, nationalities and peoples. Article 89 (sub Art. 5) states that "Government has the duty to hold, on behalf of the People, land and other natural resources and to deploy them for their common benefit and development." Thus, with more explicit roles and responsibilities for both the federal and regional governments, the constitution could provide for an essential policy base for the federal government to hold, administer and provide service in the conflictual area and border lands. However, there has been little effort to do so in the face of growing conflicts among ethnic groups and nomadic lowland communities.

Since the advent of modern government, conflict management governance in Ethiopia has been highly reliant on personality. In line with this, the EPRDF, after assuming power, immediately personalised leadership under the personality cult of late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. Meles and his political-economic vision, ruled Ethiopia for 21 years (1991-2012). His successor, Prime Minister Hale-Mariam Desalegn, was unable to continue the developmental state policy approach in the face of growing animosity within the ERDE and ethnic-rivalry. His attempt to continue Meles' legacy was met with fierce critics, both at home and abroad, which finally led to his resignation.

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6. The Communication Minister of Ethiopia, Dr Negeri Lencho, was on The National TV (EBC, July 2018) acknowledging the deaths of dozens and the displacement of over 600 civilians from Jijiga (the capital of the Somali region) and Awoday (a town in Oromia region) and surrounding areas.



Up until Meles, inter-ethnic violence and ethnically motivated attacks were at their lower rate, and immediately after his death, there were reports of internal displacement of 'other' ethnicities from the different regions in the country. Hence, the punitive state governance machinery could have been able to affectively deal with the demands. However, the persistent protests finally led to the current government and political change.

Generally, over the past decade, the country has been witnessing increased ethnic violence and anti-government protests. Both regions and federal government have failed to manage these flaring conflicts. Some rallied with demands for self-governance and equality. Scholars like Gebremichael (2012) and Erk (2014) suggest that the current crises are highly linked to political consequences of the ethnic politics. Similarly, Abbink (2012) and Taye (2017) also noted that ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia are related to this broad democratic and conflict management deficit.

## **Conflict Management Gaps in the Federal Practice**

As discussed so far, since the ratification of the constitution and the implementation so far, it has proven itself divisive in eroding the long history of societal cohesion among of the Ethiopian nation (cf. Holder *et al.*, 2006; Abink, 2011 and Aalen, 2002). According to Legesse, the federal system has been rather a source of rivalry and unhealthy competition among ethnic groups (Legesse, 2015:5). Thus, the conflicts that were witnessed during the transitional period seem to have continued to promote an unresolved identity and ethnic tension. Moreover, the federal government and regional governments' responses in the wake of ethnic clashes have been demonstrative of both constitutional and political conflict management instalments in the country. In some worst cases, officials of the regional governments have been found to be the ones perpetuating the conflicts or have joined hands with the perpetrators of ethnic violence, failing to punish and control groups who are persecuting, looting and killing.

This constitutional and administrative gap recently attracted more attention when the newly elected Prime Minister Dr Aby Mohamed announced his plan to set up an institution with a mandate to investigate and respond to the ethnic violence in the regions. Some of this crises continued to claim lives until the federal defence force could arrive and calm the people. In the present conditions, the ethnic federalism in Ethiopia has been unable to deter and or manage ethnic tensions in the country (cf. Abbink, 2006; Young, 1999; and Yohannes, *et al.*, 2005:10). Thus, these scenarios clearly showcase the institutional and leadership gaps that are producing the ethnic politics and narrative that is now the source of conflict. Thus, it is argued here that these attacks are clearly likened to the broader post-1991 state attempt at restructuring a political and ideological contradiction, i.e. it is motivated and fueled because of the politicisation of tribal identity.

The experiences of countries in Africa such as South Africa and Ghana show the intentional legal procedure for dealing with ethnicity that extend from banning it (Rwanda) right up to the depoliticisation of ethnicity. The measures in South Africa are known to us as restorative forms of justice. The state enabled truth and reconciliation to be established and compensation to be



made for various groups. Most importantly, South Africa established a transitional forum that helped the country to transform to democracy without politicising identities or various groups. Similarly, Ghana established a Constitution system that has strictly refrained from opening spaces for politicisation of ethnicity, and even banning ethnic-based political parties under its Article 55 (4). The measures have enabled these countries to enable equal access of citizens to the state (Alemante 2003). Contrary to these experiences, the Ethiopian constitution, Article 46 (2), encourages ethnicity and tribal affiliation and blatantly declares: “States shall be structured on the basis of settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the people”.

## Conclusion and Policy Implication

In summary, Ethiopia’s contemporary political trajectory is key to understanding the worsening ethnic conflicts and the federal experiment’s conflict management capacity. It also provides lessons for the current transition in Ethiopia. The de facto ethnicisation of the state politics has long been linked to conflict and civil war. Specifically, the Ethiopian constitution has been the subject of deep contest, which is the hallmark of the ethnic federal system bedeviling most of constitutional-political disagreements in the country. The empirical evidence presented in the paper also suggests these links between the resultant state and the quality of relations between rival ethnic groups and conflict management. Firstly, the establishment of ethnic peace is dependent upon the nature and effectiveness of the constitutional and policy-political process in a given country. Secondly, an agreed upon state-building process with enabling constitutional conflict management tools are essential. The evidence in Ethiopia of the federal experiment is shown in the ethnic politics in the organization, and the conduct of the state shows the link with the ever-increasing ethnic division, conflict and worsening relations.

From the empirical discussion, it is argued that colonialism had little to do with the ethnicisation of politics in the current context. This paper argues that in the context of the contemporary ethnicisation of politics in Ethiopia, the eras of king Minelik the II, King Haile-Selasse and the post 1966/1997 student-led nationalist movements have a lot to do with the emergent conflicts in Ethiopia. Most importantly, the then Addis Ababa University students who led the 17-year struggle against the dictator Mangiestu Haile Mariam were highly influenced by the reading of the Marxist-Leninist thesis of the existence of a dominant ethnic group. The students who came from the peripheries, mainly from Tigray, applied the thesis to Ethiopia and argued that the Amhara ethnic group was favoured for centuries before and including Haile-Selasse and the military Dergue. Unlike most modern African states who are threatened by ethnic politics, the Ethiopian challenge emerges from this political struggle history. In a similar way, it has the same challenges as other countries on the Continent where ethnic groups struggle to emerge along the colonial mentality of created political borders. The author argues that the colonial legacies of political borders in Africa are the drivers of ethnic fractionalization, breeding border-based conflicts. This is now the reality in Ethiopia; ethnicities are demanding more autonomy and state-hood and conflicts are emerging as to what they consider belongs within their borders. A borderless Africa is the solution.



The current political change is effected by a series of social movements, and the change still continue to witness, ethnic conflict, political contests and violence. Prominent activists who were icons of the social movements that hacked and changed the government, are now divided in their campaigning for the new order. Ethnic conflicts continue to plunge Ethiopia into chaos as a result of widening disagreements on constitutional and political foundations; and social justice and human rights violations. Furthermore, the violent conflicts in Oromia following the proposed Addis Ababa master plan and ethnic conflict in various parts of the country that have currently caused the country to rank first in the world for internally displaced people with more than 2.8 million, indicate the challenges the country is experiencing. The personalisation of governance and political power has also been a factor in the governance challenge in the country. Up until the death of Meles Zenai, political dissent in the opposition was systematically quashed and with his death, the political power struggle and rivalry got out of hand, which led to a serious of anti-government clashes and ethnic conflict. Ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia have continued even in the current transition period because of disagreement about the organising principles of the state. The current leadership has already admitted gaps in establishing law and order and this in turn is affecting effective conflict prevention and management.

This paper has pointed out the impact of the imbalance in the ethnic politics and the national unity discourse; the challenge posed by the absence of a free civil society organisation and genuine multiparty system. As discussed in the paper, this consociational democratic approach in South Africa contributed to its peaceful conflict management and prevention. Moreover, strong civil society organisations proved to be very important for successful conflict management. Over the years, EPRDF has practically grew into a dominant party in the country – crushing the opposition or forcing many to become militants. The government effectively marginalised civil society from the democratisation endeavour in the country with its stringent laws. Thus, for effective and efficient conflict management, the government must continue its current effort of opening up the political space and the civil society needs to strengthen itself to work on designing conflict management strategies and monitoring the efficiency of the institutions in place.

The current democratic and political transition in Ethiopia present a huge opportunity to create a level field for protecting groups' rights while equally promoting national unity by reshaping the modus operandi of party organisation and the MEDEMER discourse ushered by Prime Minister Aby Ahmed. Given the successive failure of the federal state system to deter ethnic conflicts and secure peace, influential activists and politicians alike are calling for the revision of the continual state system, a broadening of the democratic space and the renegotiation of nation building in general. politics has been the driver of state fragility, inter-ethnic conflicts and violence. This highlights the need to continue to push reforms and robust change in the state's organisation. Sustainable conflict management requires the (re)negotiation of a state-building approach in Ethiopia and on the Continent.





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