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THE IMPACT OF ETHNO-LINGUISTIC FEDERALISM ON STATE BUILDING, THE ETHIOPIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Ethno-linguistic federalism in Ethiopia has caused ethno-national diversified groups to be recognized and promoted. The federal formula lacked genuine institutions and practices to promote democratic state unity in diversity. The federal system accelerated diversity which failed to balance ethno-national identity with Ethiopian state citizenship as a result it endangered the state sustenance. Failure to balance national diversity and Ethiopian citizenship brought adverse consequence, such as, ethnic based campus conflict among university students, the displacement of Oromos from Somali regional state, the displacement the Amharas and Oromos from Benishangul Gumuz, the Gedeo people's displacement from Guji Oromia region…etc are some to mention. Above all, ethno-linguistic national identity is taken as a sole defining identity which has created a stumbling block for state/national building in Ethiopia. This article argues it is a must to foster a democratic federal political system in Ethiopia along with building genuine democratic institutions that are accountable to the people. There should, moreover, be a national consensus on maintaining

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state unity within diversity so that the voices of national minorities (both titular and non-titular) in different regions are heard and respected by allowing them to have political seats in their respective regions.

Keywords*:* Impact Ethno-linguistic, Federalism, State building

1. Introduction

A global growing awareness to promote federalism as a solution to a state problem intensified in the 1990s (Watts 2007). The modern Ethiopian state had previously been ruled under a unitary state structure since the Menelik II era and power centralism and bureaucratization were the features of the three successive governments of Ethiopia under Menelik, Haile Sellassie and the Derge. Ethiopia had no previous history of federalism, except for the short- lived Ethio-Eritrea federation from 1952 to 1962 (see Thomas-Woolley and Keller 1994).

After the collapse of the Imperial regime, and with the coming into power of the military junta, which to address the identity question, the regime produced the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) in April 1976. Which states as follows:

The right to self-determination of all nationalities will be recognized and fully respected. No nationality will dominate another one since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism. The unity of Ethiopia's nationalities will be based on their common struggle against feudalism, imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism and reactionary forces. This united struggle is based on the desire to construct new life and a new society based on equality, brotherhood and mutual respect. ... Given Ethiopia's existing situation, the problem of nationalities can be resolved if each nationality is accorded full right to self-government. This means that each nationality will have regional autonomy to decide on matters concerning its internal affairs. Within its environs, it has the right to determine the contents of its political, economic and social life; use its own language and

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elect its own leaders and administration to head its own organs (NDR as cited in Merera 2007).

This document, however, was never put into practice (Merera 2007). The military regime once again re-introduced regional autonomy in 1987 after the adoption of the constitution of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE). This constitution established regional autonomy and established five autonomous regions, such as: Eritrea, Tigray, Dire Dawa, Ogaden and Assab for mere security reasons (Asnake 2013). Otherwise, the PDRE government neglected to answer the question of identity on the ground. And this eventually intensified the civil war which culminated in the toppling of the regime.

In 1991, with the assumption of state power by the EPRDF, an ethnic federal system which recognized ethnic right to self-rule was established during a transitional period that finally led to the adoption of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia's constitution in 1994/95. As stated in the introduction, the FDRE constitution upholds multinational federalism so as to allow the different nationality communities to exercise the right to self-rule up to secession as enshrined in the FDRE constitution, whose article 39 states:

Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to Self-determination, including the right to secession. Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history. Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to full measure of self-government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation in state and federal governments.

The constitution, therefore, divided political power between the federal government and regions. The regions were mainly established along ethno-linguistic lines in order to exercise the right to self-rule. This paper tries to present

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the notion and need for federalism and the implications of ethno-linguistic federalism in Ethiopia.

2. The notion of federalism

The famous federal studies scholar, Daniel J. Elazar, traces the idea of federalism to the biblical time of God's covenant with Israel. He notes that, initially, the term was used to describe the union between God and His people as stated in the Bible, regarding a covenantal bond between human beings and God which, ultimately, brought the use of the term into politics (Elazar 1987). The term *federal* comes from the Latin word *foedus*, which is similar to the Hebrew term *brit*, meaning covenant (Elazar 1987). Today, nearly 40% of the world's population lives in states that have established a federal political system (Elazar 1987; Burgess 2017).

Academic discourse about modern federalism dates back to the late eighteenth century and is the result of work of the federalists Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and James Madison who transformed the USA from a confederation to federalism (Burgess 2006).

Federalism became an important instrument for nation building with the demise of European colonial rule after the Second World War (Watts 2007). In the post Second World War period, interest in federalism grew due to two factors: (i) the wartime success and post-war prosperity of predominant federations such as the USA, Switzerland, Canada and Australia; and the independence of African, Asian and Caribbean nations and (ii) factors related to the end of the European colonial empires in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean as well as the destruction of ultra-nationalism (Watts 2007).

The idea *federalism,* as stated by Daniel Elazar, involves elements of both shared rule and self-rule (Elazar 1987). A federal government is most likely to be formed when the question arises of whether small states shall remain perfectly independent or be consolidated into a single larger state. A federal system

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harmonizes the two contending principles by reconciling a certain amount of union with a certain amount of independence (Freeman as cited in Burgess 2006). Guzina (2010) states that there is no uniform criteria to define federations because federations differ in many respects: number of regional units, degree of centralization, role of the constitution, allocation of taxing powers and the degree of regional, economic and social diversity.

Watts stated that a federal system structure should comprise the following features: (i). two or more tiers of government in which each tier is responsive to their citizens (ii) a formal constitutional distribution of legislative and executive authority and share of revenue resources between the different tiers of government ensuring some areas of genuine autonomy for each order; (iii) authorizing the upper chamber of parliament to engage in federal public policy making ; (iv) a supreme written constitution whose amendment requires the engagement of the federal government and regions, (v) the interpretation of the constitution by courts, and (vi) institutions should exist to coordinate intergovernmental cooperation in joint responsibilities areas (Watts 2007, see also Elazar 1987). Guzina argues that not all federal states incorporate those elements and mentions Belgium, for example, whose federated units do not have a right to amend the federal constitution and Canada whose upper chamber, the Senate, is not a policy- making body (Guzina 2010).

3. The need for and formation of federalism

According to IDEA (2015), two deriving forces must be present in order to consider federalism as a political system: identity and efficiency. Identity federalism regards two or more culturally, linguistically, religiously, etc. diversified communities which have shared values and live together as one political community with meaningful autonomy in the political community, such as, Canada, and Switzerland for example.

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Efficiency federalism, on the other hand, ensures administrative efficiency in homogenous but geographically large states, so as to improve democratic representation and accountability by devolving political power and allowing better control over resources and policies to local people while upholding national unity and the ability to act consistently with national policy, such as in Germany, Argentina. Many authors agree with these arguments regarding the formation for federations. According to William Riker, federations are formed through a political bargain between two bodies for security reasons. The purpose for the bargain for both bodies is external and military: either the perceived need to defend against possible external aggression or the desire to engage in external aggression (as cited in Fenna 2016).

Unlike William Riker who accounted military reasons for federal creation, Alfred Stepan argued the opposite stating that federalism can be created to address diversity. Similarly, Burgess stated that the impetus for federation is to defend and promote the diversity which exists in cultural-ideology (linguistic, religious, nationalist, ethnic, historical, philosophical, territorial and even politico-psychological distinctions) and socio-economic differences (Burgess 2017).

Stepan identified another two forms of federalism in addition to Riker's: coming together and these are holding-together and putting together federalism. Coming together federalism refers to is the result of a bargain whereby previously sovereign polities agree to give up part of their sovereignty in order to pool their resources, increase their collective security and achieve other goals, including economic ones (Stepan 1999).

Holding together federalism, on the other hand, maintains the state unity of a previously unitary state devolves power constitutionally to deter secessionist movements, example, India, Belgium, and Spain. That means, such federalism, an existing unitary state chooses to become a federation to address questions related managing diversity.

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Putting together federalism employs force not consent. It is the undemocratic type of federation formation, as seen in the ex-USSR, ex-Yugoslavia and ex-Czechoslovakia (Stepan 1999). Stepan argued in contrast to William Riker who claimed that all federations involve bargaining. He claimed that all federations do not involve bargaining. And according to him, the ex-Soviet Union qualifies Riker's model of federal system, but, accepting "it is clearly a distortion of history, language, and theory to call what happened in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, for example, a "federal bargain." These three previously independent countries were conquered by the 11th Red Army. In Azerbaijan, the former nationalist prime minister and ... former head of the army were executed just one week after accepting the "bargain" " (Stepan 1999: 22).

To fill the gap in Riker's view of federal formation, Burgess (2006) developed a theory of circumstantial causation that values historical issues in the process of the creations of federations. According to Burgess, four conditions are accounted in the course of the federal system of creation:

1. Federations established by a liberal democratic constitutional state, which rejects that the ex- Soviet Union and Argentina, Brazil and Nigeria which show federalism structures without real federation functions.

2. The origin of federations is different from the formation of federations. Thus, it is important to comprehend historical factors, conceptual clarity and comparative analysis for federation formation;

3. The origins and formation of federation are based upon two different historical processes, aggregation and/or disaggregation; and

4. There is a difference between democratic credentials regarding the origin of federations that were formed in the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early

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twentieth centuries and those formed after the end of the Second World War (Burgess 2006).

4. Can federal function exist without democracy?

From international comparative federation experience, the lesson is that federalism functions adequately in democratic political system. King (1982) discussed that genuine federalism must be established on constitutional law and representations which are the pillars of liberal democracy (as cited in Ross 2005).

Democratic federalism allows the rule of the majority including minority rights to self-rule as shown by the experience of Belgium, Canada, and India. Federation lacks stability in the absence of democracy as the case observed in Nigeria. Federal structures without federal processes and functions are observed in authoritarian state of Russia (see Obydenkova and Swenden 2013; Ross 2002; Ross 2005; Lynn and Novikov 1997).

5. Ethno-linguistic federalism in Ethiopia

Regarding the origin and practices of federalism in Ethiopia, it is important to look at political history whether the Rikerian model is the best way to explain it or not. The background for the introduction of ethno-linguistic-based federalism in Ethiopia can be traced back to the Ethiopian Students' Movement that pursued Marxist-Leninist ideology to support the right of ethno-national groups to self-determination including the right to secession (Young 1998; Beek 2002).

According to Beek, the Ethiopian Students' Movement had element of self-determination requests she citing student *Wallelign's* publication in the student Magazine *struggle* in which he advocated the right to secession of national groups. The Ethiopian revolution, which was intensified by Ethiopian

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students, brought an end to the imperial regime that brought the military junta the opportunity to assume state power.

The military regime realized that a federally structured Ethiopia could answer the question of nationalities by establishing the Institute of Nationalities in 1983, though fallen short of implementation (see Young 1988).

In the short- lived PDRE constitution, article 2(4) states that "The People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia shall ensure the realization of regional autonomy". Nevertheless, it remained on paper. When EPRDF assumed state power in 1991 it became a base for EPRDF to establish a federal like state structure during the transitional period.

After the demise of the socialist led regime and coming into power of the EPRDF, a federal political system was found to be the only viable political system. Whether the federation was coming together or withholding, Ethiopian scholar and incumbent government advisor, Andreas (2003) claims the federation as coming together by citing the preamble of the constitution which reads as:

"We, the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia: Strongly committed, in full and free exercise of our right to Self-determination, to building a political community founded on the rule of law and capable of ensuring a lasting peace, guaranteeing a democratic order, and advancing our economic and social development;……".

Even though the preamble of the constitution and the constitution itself provided the ultimate source of political power to the nations, nationalities and peoples of the Ethiopia, it does not make the federation as coming together, as there were no previously independent states in Ethiopia before that; moreover, the federation was born from the long time rule of a unitary state structure and hoped to keep the unity of the country, and holding together federalism may qualify the formation of the Ethiopian federal system.

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According to the constitution, the Nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia are provided with the right to self-rule yet this right to self-rule of the so-called nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia is not accommodative of minority rights and interests as the minorities are not fairly represented in the regional councils.

The experience of twenty seven years experimentation of 'a federal democratic' governance in Ethiopia has culminated in intense public unrest questing for genuine democratic federalism and administrative border questions. Even if the EPRDF and its satellite parties won 100% seats in the legislative assembly of both the federal government and regional governments in 2014, after the year time, following the announcements of the Addis Ababa Integrated Development Master Plan in April 2014 which tends to amalgamate towns and villages in the Oromia region of Ethiopia, a massive protest started in the region which, of course, triggered deep-rooted public dissatisfaction. A similar protest broke out in the Amhara region of Ethiopia in August 2016 regarding the issue of the *Wolkayit* administrative district border dispute between the Amhara and the Tigray region.

The administrative border dispute issue is not yet settled as the Ethiopian federal system lacked democracy and genuine institutions that regulate intergovernmental relations. The hallmark of democratic governance is the rule of majority in which minority rights are respected through established institutions. In this regard, the Ethiopian federal system needs revisions as, for instance, in the Harari regional state, the numerical majority-the Oromos and Amharas do not have meaningful roles that corresponds to their demographical size whereas in contrast the numerical minority the Adere (Harari) community holds the political power.

The other case is, the numerical minorities in different regions are not allowed to have seats in their respective regional councils. For example, the Benishagul Gumuz regional state constitution, article 2 reads as " it is known

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that there are different national groups in Benishangul-Gumuz; however, the owner of the region are five national groups, namely, Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao and Komo". According to this article, the Oromos, the Amharas and other national groups who live there are not entitled to regional ownership meaning that they do not have a role in political decision making.

Even if it is not as such clearly stated in other regional states constitution, the spirit is more or less the same without ignoring the good practices of Amhara region where the indigenous non-Amharas are entitled to the right to self-rule under the label of special zones. In both regions, the question of democracy, good governance in the public service delivery and practice of genuine federalism caused wide scale public protests and dictated the ruling EPRDF government to introduce *political reforms*.

As a result of the continued popular unrest in the same regions of Ethiopia, a nation-wide state of emergency was declared in October 2016. After the lifting the state of emergency, however, peaceful resistance with mixed violence erupted again in those regions, for the second time, government dictated to declare state of emergency in February 2018 which also could not stop the immense popular unrest demanding genuine reform in governance. Finally, the ruling party, EPRDF after exhaustive party meeting elected its new leader, Dr. Abbiy Ahmed who assumed Prime Ministerial office on April 2, 2018, and began to introduce different political reform measures to stabilize the state.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The inappropriate implementation of federalism over the past 27 years promoted polarization and the extreme diversity rather than unity within diversity that culminated in the displacement of thousands of people across different regions of Ethiopia. According to the ICDM report of September 2018, internally displaced people due to ethnic conflict and violence in Ethiopia has a

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shocking total of 1.4 million people have been displaced internally due to ethnic conflict and violence, a number greater than that in Syria.

Research respondents' in the interview from the Southern Nation Nationalities and Peoples Region, Tigray and the Oromia National Regional State Government areas stated that "they view the rise of ethno-nationalism at large as a threat to the federal system". Likewise, archival sources of EPRDF party members confirm this.

In his study of federalism in Nepal and Myanmar, Breen (2019) indicated that how democracy matter for the proper implementation of meaningful federalism. According to his study, authoritarianism is threatening state unity in the federation of Myanmar while democratic process is supporting the federal experimentation in Nepal. Likewise, Sanjaume-Calvet (2018) argues that in multinational federation, fair power sharing and autonomy is a means to deter the dissolution of federation or to maintain state unity is the other expression of democratic federalism.

Hence, it is a high time for all Ethiopians to adhere to values of democratic federalism in which the voices of all shall be heard and to take a lesson from the failed ethno-federations of former Yugoslavia, the USSR and Czechoslovakia where autocratic ethnic politics somehow accounted for the dissolution of those federations (see Leff 1999).

What we currently see in Ethiopia is strong regions and a weak federal government even seeing *a state within a state* which puts the federal system in question. Moreover, the federal formula's failure to balance ethnic identity with Ethiopian citizenship promoted extreme differences instead of affirming unity in differences. Moreover, ethnic based hate speeches on the social media, fake news and the proliferation of ultra-ethno-nationalism are threats to state unity and stability.

The transition to democracy in Ethiopia is at a crossroad where polarized ideas are prevailing. For the sustenance of the state and transition to

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democratization, the following measures should ,therefore, be taken into account more seriously as we need to secure national consensus; the guardians of democratic federalism should be adhered to by all the groups and individuals concerned; the federal government and regional governments, including the long serving EPRDF coalition parties should cooperate each other on common national issues; ultra-ethno-nationalism should be denounced instead promoting democratic ethno-nationalism in which minority rights are respected; moreover, individual citizens, civil society groups, the private business groups, political parties, and activists should promote the values of democratic federalism and peaceful coexistence among the varied national communities of Ethiopia. Above all, federal and regional governments should be committed to play their roles to maintain constitutional law and order by strengthening democratic institutions.

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