

# **Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia: Background, Present Conditions and Future Prospects\***

by

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## **Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia**

### **Abstract**

In 1991 Ethiopia established an ethnic federal system that gave full recognition to ethnic autonomy, while maintaining the unity of the state. Its new constitution created a federal system largely consisting of ethnic-based territorial units. The constitution aspires to achieve ethnic autonomy and equality while maintaining the state. The federal system is significant in that its constitution provides for secession of any ethnic unit. It encourages political parties to organize along ethnic lines, and champions an ethnicized federal state with a secession option. As an exception to the general pattern in Africa, it is a worthy case study. The paper has four interrelated objectives. First, it situates the Ethiopian case in comparative perspective. Second, it provides an overview of ethnic diversity in Ethiopia. Third, it analyzes the evolution and structure of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. Fourth, it attempts to provide a preliminary appraisal of its success and failure thus far and to speculate on its future prospects.

## Introduction

In 1991, following the collapse of military rule, Ethiopia established a federal system creating largely ethnic-based territorial units,<sup>1</sup> its framers claiming they have found a formula to achieve ethnic and regional autonomy, while maintaining the state as a political unit.<sup>2</sup> The initial process of federalization lasted four years, and was formalized in a new constitution in 1995. The Ethiopian ethnic federal system is significant in that it provides for secession of any ethnic unit. The secession clause is one of the most controversial issues in public discourse in Ethiopia and its diaspora communities today.<sup>3</sup>

Opponents of ethnic federalism fear that it invites ethnic conflict and risks state disintegration.<sup>4</sup> The Ethiopian state, they worry, may face the same fate as the USSR and Yugoslavia.<sup>5</sup> Others, of an ethnonationalist persuasion, doubt the government's real commitment to self-determination; they support the ethnic federal constitution *per se*, but claim that it has not been put into practice.<sup>6</sup> To many critics, the federal state is a *de facto* one-party state in which ethnic organizations are mere satellites of one ethnic organization, the Tigray Peoples Liberation

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<sup>1</sup> The regional states that formed the federation in 1991 were: 1. Tigray; 2. Afar; 3. Amhara; 4. Oromia; 5. Somali; 6. Benishangul-Gumuz; 7-11 Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples (a "voluntary" merger of 5 regions); 12. Gambella; 13. Harari; and 14. Addis Ababa. Later, Dire Dawa was made a federal city-state.

<sup>2</sup> In reality, ethnic federalism was necessary to satisfy the most important constituent of EPRDF, the Tigreans in the TPLF who were initially mobilized to fight for autonomy and/or secession.

<sup>3</sup> Inside Ethiopia, see various issues since 1991 of private print media, including *Addis Tribune, Reporter* (Amharic and English), *Tobia* (Amharic); in the U.S., see *Ethiopian Register*, and *Ethiopian Review*, published in Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>4</sup> Marina Ottaway, *Democratization and Ethnic Nationalism: African and Eastern European Experiences*. (Washington, D.C.: Overseas Development Council, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Solomon Gashaw, "Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia," *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism*, ed. Crawford Young (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 138–157.

<sup>6</sup> Mohammed Hassen, "Ethiopia's Missed Opportunities for Peaceful Democratization Process," paper presented at

Front (hereafter referred to as TPLF), the leading unit in the ruling coalition, the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (hereafter referred to as EPRDF). Finally, those who consider Ethiopia to be a colonial empire see the federal exercise as yet another colonial trick, and advocate "decolonization."<sup>7</sup> Supporters of ethnic federalism point out that it has maintained the unity of the Ethiopian peoples and the territorial integrity of the state, while providing full recognition to the principle of ethnic equality. It is important to examine objectively whether ethnic federalism is a viable way of resolving conflict between ethnonationalism and state nationalism. Now that the ethnic federal experiment is more than a decade old, it is possible to make a tentative evaluation of its performance.

This paper consists of four sections: 1) a presentation of Ethiopian ethnic federalism in comparative perspective; 2) an overview of ethnic diversity in Ethiopia prior; 3) an analysis of the evolution and structure of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia; 4) a preliminary appraisal of the success and failure of ethnic federalism and speculation on its future prospects. The sources of data for this paper include public documents, fieldwork, and interviews. The public documents include the Charter of the Transitional Government and the present constitution, relevant proclamations, government statistical data, government and private print media, state radio and television. I spent several months during 2000-2002 observing political developments in the country as they pertain to ethnic federalism. I personally interviewed 30 Ethiopians, including public officials, NGO staff, academics, intellectuals, and businesspersons in Addis Ababa.

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the 37<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the African Studies Association, Toronto, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Asafa Jalata, ed., *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse* (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1998).

## Ethiopia in Comparative Perspective

Following World War II and the start of decolonization, newly independent countries in Africa struggled to create viable nation-states combining different ethnic groupings within the territorial boundaries inherited from colonialism.<sup>8</sup> For these countries, modernity entailed the transformation of disparate ethnic groups into a unitary nation-state with a common language and citizenship.<sup>9</sup> France was the model nation-state *par excellence*.<sup>10</sup> Such a nation-state came to be regarded as a badge of modernity, while “ethnicism” was associated with backwardness and repudiated by modernizing elites.<sup>11</sup> Many African countries followed the nation-state model and attempted to create a unified nation out of disparate peoples.<sup>12</sup> Since most African countries are multiethnic, the Ethiopian experiment with ethnic federalism is of special interest to students of African politics. Ever since decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, the belief that ethnic identity should be denied public expression in political institutions has been conventional wisdom in the continent. The 1960s witnessed the rise of state nationalism in Africa.<sup>13</sup> State nationalists attempted to undermine ethnic nationalism,<sup>14</sup> which they saw as an obstacle to modern state formation. Despite their arbitrariness, the territorial entities inherited from colonialism formed

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Neuberger, “Federalism in Africa: Experience and Prospects,” *Federalism and Political Integration*, ed. Daniel J. Elazar (Tel Aviv: Turtledove Publishing, 1979), 171-188.

<sup>9</sup> Reinhard Bendix, *Nation-Building and Citizenship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964).

<sup>10</sup> Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 90.

<sup>11</sup> Goldthorpe, J.E. 1996. *The Sociology of Post-Colonial Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Neuberger, “State and Nation in African Thought,” *Nationalism*, ed. John Hutchinson & Anthony D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 231-235.

<sup>13</sup> Ghana became independent in 1957. Many African countries followed suit in 1960.

<sup>14</sup> According to Smith, ethnic nationalism is a consequence of the development or, better still, politicization of ethnic consciousness by an ethnic community. It entails vernacular mobilization, cultural politicization, and ethnic purification. Anthony D. Smith, “The Ethnic Sources of Nationalism,” ed. M. Brown (Princeton: Princeton

the basis for nation-state-building. The chief challenge was to replace ethnic identity with national identity, rather than simply superimpose the latter. Suspicion of ethnic nationalism is discernible to this day. In Uganda, to take an extreme example, the state altogether disallows ethnic parties; it champions a de-ethnicized unitary state.

Yet, it is undeniable that the effects, largely deleterious, of ethnic identity on public life persist unabated. Despite its official banishment from political life, ethnic nationalism has proved a potent political force throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>15</sup> Recognition of the importance people attach to ethnic identities and interests informs the Ethiopian experiment that accommodates the institutional expression of ethnicity in public life. Ethiopian ethnic federalism encourages political parties to organize along ethnic lines, and champions an ethnicized federal state. As an exception to the general pattern in Africa, it is worthy of a close examination. A brief review of a few federal systems among African, communist, and western countries is useful to understand better the unique and radical aspects of the Ethiopian federal system.

Among African countries, Nigeria is notable in creating a federal system and committing itself to cultural and structural pluralism. At the time of its independence in 1960, its federal system consisted of three regions, each with a dominant ethnic group. In 1967,<sup>16</sup> a total of twelve states were created. By 1996, it had expanded to thirty-six states, in part, so that ethnic group and

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University Press, 1993) 35-37.

<sup>15</sup> M. A. M. Salih and John Markakis *Ethnicity and the State in Eastern Africa* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1998), p. 7. As Brietzke observes, "the end of the Cold War has seen an explosion of ethnic nationalisms similar to the one occurring in Europe late in the nineteenth century." Paul H. Brietzke, "Ethiopia's 'Leap in the Dark': Federalism and Self-Determination in the Draft Constitution." Paper presented to the Horn of Africa Conference, Trento, Italy, December, 1994: 1.

<sup>16</sup> It is also the year the Biafra war of secession started.

state and would not correspond. Thus, in sharp contrast to Ethiopia's federal system, Nigerian federalism is certainly not ethnic-based in structure or objective.

Outside the developing world, Yugoslavia and the USSR had constitutional arrangements that recognized the right to self-determination and secession. Yugoslavia's 1946 communist constitution gave each republic a right to self-determination and secession. By 1974, Yugoslavia consisted of five "nations."<sup>17</sup> But Marshal Tito organized the federal system in such a way that there was no precise correspondence between ethnic territories and the various republics.<sup>18</sup> Once the federation collapsed in 1992, ethnic cleansing was unleashed to forcibly make ethnic units coincide with political territories.<sup>19</sup> The Soviet regime had created conditions that were conducive to the transformation of ethnic nationalism into state nationalism.<sup>20</sup> It institutionalized nationhood and nationality at the sub-state level and, thus, inadvertently paved the way for its own disintegration.<sup>21</sup> Both Soviet and Yugoslav federal structures had collapsed by the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, corporate pluralist western countries such as Switzerland, Belgium, and Canada formally recognize ethnic units, and allocate political (e.g., legislative and executive positions)

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<sup>17</sup> Metta Spencer, ed., *Separatism: Democracy and Disintegration* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 162.

<sup>18</sup> Bogdan Denitch, *Ethnic Nationalism: The Tragic Death of Yugoslavia* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> The Yugoslav experience is, thus, not helpful to those who argue that federalization on other than ethnic criteria would avert "ethnic cleansing."

<sup>20</sup> As Brubaker observes, "The Soviet institutions of territorial nationhood and personal nationality comprised a pervasive system of social classification ... a set of boundary-markers... and, when political space expanded under Gorbachev, a ready-made template for claims of sovereignty." Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 24.

<sup>21</sup> Brubaker, 29.

and economic power on the basis of an ethnic formula.<sup>22</sup> Ethnic groups are integrated only in their mutual allegiance to a larger national government and the need to participate in a national economic system.<sup>23</sup> One of the ways Ethiopia's federalism differs from the other corporate pluralist states, however, is in its allowance for the right of secession. The constitutional marrying of political pluralism and the right of secession makes Ethiopia's ethnic federalism unique.

### **Ethnic Diversity in Ethiopia**

Ethiopia has great ethnic diversity with 84 ethnic groups.<sup>24</sup> Twelve of these ethnic groups have a population of half a million or more, out of a population of 53 million in 1994 (see Table 1). The two major ethnic groups (the Oromo and the Amhara) constitute over 62 percent of the population. The third largest ethnic group, the Tigray, has been the politically dominant ethnic group since 1991, but comprises only 6 percent of the population.<sup>25</sup> The three ethnic groups constitute more than two-thirds of the population. In 1994, four other ethnic groups, namely, Somali, Gurage, Sidama, and Welaita, had a population of over one million. The seven largest ethnic groups comprise 84.5 percent of the country's population. Five ethnic groups (Afar, Hadiya, Gamo, Gedeo, and Keffa) had populations between 599,000 and 1,000,000. The twelve largest ethnic groups constitute almost 92 percent of the population. Fourteen ethnic groups had

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<sup>22</sup> Martin N. Marger, *Race and Ethnic Relations* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), 127.

<sup>23</sup> Marger, 128.

<sup>24</sup> The estimate of the number of ethnic groups in Ethiopia ranges from 63 (the number given by the transitional government in 1991) to 84 (based on the number of languages in the country). Other countries with high ethnic diversity include the U. S., Canada, Russia, India, and Nigeria.

<sup>25</sup> The military prowess the TPLF demonstrated in the struggle against military rule enabled it to acquire political



populations between 100,000 and 500,000, while twenty-eight ethnic groups had a population of between 10,000 and 100,000. Twenty-three ethnic groups had a population of less than 10,000 each in 1994.<sup>26</sup> For the most part, each ethnic group has its own language.

Table 1 about here

The religious composition of the population is as follows: Christian (61.7 %), Muslim (32.8 %), Traditional (4.6 %), Others (0.9 %), Not Stated (0.1 %). Orthodox Christians constitute 50.6 %, Protestants constitute 10.2 %, and Catholics comprise 0.9 % of the total population (see Table 2 for numerical breakdown).<sup>27</sup> The “Traditional” category above refers to those Ethiopians who follow indigenous religions. Ethiopian Jews, known as *Bete Israel* or *Falasha* roughly one hundred thousand in the recent past but virtually all of them immigrated to Israel within the last two decades.

Table 2 about here

The history of state formation in Ethiopia is a source of profound, even bitter contention. At one extreme, pan-Ethiopian nationalists contend that the state is some 3,000 years old. According to this perspective, well represented by Gashaw, the Ethiopian state has existed for millennia, forging a distinct national identity. Ethiopian nationalism is a historically verifiable reality, not a myth. It has successfully countered ethnic and regional challenges. The assimilation of periphery cultures into Amhara or Amhara/Tigray core culture made the creation of the

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dominance since 1991.

<sup>26</sup> See FDRE Central Statistical Authority, *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia: Results at Country Level Volume II Analytical Report*. (Addis Ababa: CSA, June 1999), 41-43.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

Ethiopian nation possible.<sup>28</sup> From this perspective, Ethiopia is the melting pot *par excellence*.<sup>29</sup>

Its image is one of Ethiopia as a *nation-state*.

At the other extreme, ethnonationalist groups such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) claim that Abyssinia (central and northern Ethiopia, the historic core of Ethiopian polity) colonized roughly half the territories and peoples to form a colonial empire-state in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> From the ethnonationalist vantage point, Ethiopia is a colonial empire that needs to undergo decolonization where "ethnonational" colonies become independent states.<sup>31</sup> Its image is one of Ethiopia as a *colonial-state*.<sup>32</sup>

A more sensible image of Ethiopia would be as a historically evolved (non-colonial) empire-state.<sup>33</sup> The ancient Ethiopian state, short-term contractions in size notwithstanding, expanded, over a long historical period, through the conquest and incorporation of adjoining

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<sup>28</sup> According to Gashaw: "The Ethiopian ruling classes cannot be identified with a particular ethnic group. They are a multi-ethnic group whose only common factors are that they are *Christians, Amharic speakers, and claim lineage to the Solomonic line*" Solomon Gashaw, 142, emphasis added).

<sup>29</sup> "The central theme of Ethiopian history ... has been the maintenance of a culture core which has adapted itself to the exigencies of time and place, assimilating diverse people." Zewde Gabre Sellassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia: A Political Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1.

<sup>30</sup> Reflecting OLF views, Herbert S. Lewis maintains that "the modern empire was created only during the last 110 years as a result of the rapid southward military expansion of the Amhara rulers of Shoa." Herbert S. Lewis, "Ethnicity in Ethiopia: The View from Below (and from the South, East, and West)." 158–178 in Crawford Young (ed.), *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 160.

<sup>31</sup> Asafa Jalata, 1998.

<sup>32</sup> Straddling the two polar viewpoints is one that makes a distinction between the ancient Abyssinian state of two or three millennia and the modern state of Ethiopia emerging in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (See Markakis, "Ethnic Conflict in Pre-Federal Ethiopia," paper submitted to the 1<sup>st</sup> National Conference on Federalism, Conflict and Peace Building, May 5-7, 2003, Addis Ababa, p. 1). But this distinction does not suggest a way of bridging the two periods or states, nor does it explain the continuity/discontinuity apparently suggested.

<sup>33</sup> For a seminal and unrivalled sociological work on the subject, see Donald N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974).

kingdoms, principalities, sultanates, etc., as indeed most states in the world were formed.<sup>34</sup> The declared objective of the framers of ethnic federalism was to transform the empire-state into a democratic state of ethnic pluralism<sup>35</sup> in order to ensure that no ethnic community would find it necessary or desirable to secede.

Adopting the French model, modern Ethiopian governments attempted to forge cultural homogenization through state centralization and one-language policy during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the span of a century, three forms of ethnic social engineering have been attempted in Ethiopia. The first social engineering was designed by Emperor Menelik (1889-1913) but significantly elaborated by Emperor Haile Selassie (1930-36, 1941-74). It attempted to create a unitary state on the basis of cultural assimilation, using Amharic as the sole language of instruction and public discourse and Abyssinian Orthodox Christian culture as the core culture of Ethiopian national identity.<sup>36</sup> This effort was in keeping with the pan-Ethiopian nationalist perspective. Cultural and structural inequalities typified imperial rule, with ethnic and regional discontent rising until the revolution of 1974 overthrew the monarchy. The policy of assimilation into mainstream Amhara culture provoked some subordinated ethnic groups into initiating ethnic movements in various regions of the empire-state.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> In many pluralistic societies, ethnic groups have become part of a larger national society either through conquest or by voluntarily relinquishing sovereignty to a central state in order to secure economic and political benefit. See Marger.

<sup>35</sup> Some Ethiopianist scholars see democracy and ethnic federalism as mutually exclusive. See, for example, Theodore M. Vestal, *Ethiopia: A Post-Cold War African State* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), 207. Brietzke, however, characterizes the experiment as "an ethnicized attempt at a democratization" (1).

<sup>36</sup> "Abyssinian nationalism, whose traditional organic core was the Tigre/Amhara segment of the population, was a hegemonic doctrine with relation to other ethnic groups" (Gashaw, 138).

<sup>37</sup> See Alem Habtu, "Books on the Ethiopian Revolution: A Review Essay," *Socialism and Democracy* 3 (1986): 27-60.

The second ethnic social engineering (1974-91) was the military government's attempt to retain a unitary state and address the "national question" within the framework of Marxism-Leninism.<sup>38</sup> To address the latter, it set up the Institute for the Study of Nationalities in 1983. Based on the Institute's recommendations, the military regime created twenty-four administrative regions and five autonomous regions within the unitary form of state, but no devolution of authority was discernible.<sup>39</sup> In 1979, the regime initiated a mass National Literacy Campaign in 15 Ethiopian languages.<sup>40</sup> At the same time as it was making these and related efforts (e.g., in legitimating ethnic folk music and dance) in the direction of cultural pluralism, the regime waged a military campaign against ethno-nationalist armed groups. In the last decade of its rule, ethnic-based opposition organizations had intensified their assault on the military government and ethnic nationalism became a major factor in the demise of the centralizing military regime.<sup>41</sup>

The previous two social engineering attempts had failed by 1974 and 1991, respectively. The third ethnic social engineering (1991-present), under investigation here, is the EPRDF government's attempt to maintain the Ethiopian state on the basis of ethnic federalism as well as cultural, language and political autonomy at regional and sub-regional levels.

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<sup>38</sup> According to the military regime's 1987 constitution, Ethiopia was a unitary state that "shall ensure the equality of nationalities, combat chauvinism and narrow nationalism" (Article 2). Brietzke observes: "In true Leninist fashion and apart from celebrations of local music and dances, Mengistu's style of governance was universalist and unitarist in the extreme; through 'popular' mobilizations, *'the masses' were to be emancipated from their nationalities as well as their class*" (p. 3, emphasis added).

<sup>39</sup> See Solomon Gashaw, a member of the military regime's Institute for the Study of Nationalities (1993: 154).

<sup>40</sup> See Alem Habtu, *Women's Education in Ethiopia in Historical Perspective and the (1979-91) National Literacy Campaign* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Company), pp. 140-148.

<sup>41</sup> "The legal unaccountability of senior officials that was pioneered by Haile Selassie took even more authoritarian directions under Mengistu, and this helped to fuel regional rebellions and an increased ethnic consciousness" (Brietzke, p. 2).

Ethnonationalist movements grew immensely during military rule. Apart from the Eritrean nationalist movements, the major ethnic organizations included the TPLF, Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and Afar Liberation Front (ALF); minor organizations included Islamic Oromo Liberation Front (IOLF), Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), Ogadeni National Liberation Front (ONLF).<sup>42</sup> Ethnonationalist organizations posed the gravest threat to military rule and to the unity and territorial integrity of the country. Indeed, it is the TPLF/EPRDF, and to a lesser extent, OLF, Afar and Somali movements that, in collaboration with the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF), brought down the military regime. TPLF, OLF, and WSLF had sought secession prior to the collapse of the military junta. They were willing to come together to forge a new constitutional arrangement they could all live with probably because they had come to realize that secession was not a viable option. At the same time, however, a secession provision had to be made a part of the compact, if only to justify the sacrifices they had called upon their mobilized constituents to make during long years of struggle. It is likely that at least one or perhaps more ethnonationalist movement(s) would not have joined a federal arrangement if secession were not constitutionally recognized.

The ideological antecedents of EPRDF's ethnic federalism project can be traced to Marxist-Leninist ideology and its conception of "the national question." The project followed the example of the USSR and Yugoslavia. The Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) at home and abroad had introduced Marxism-Leninism to Ethiopia in the mid-1960s. "The national question"

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<sup>42</sup> WSLF and ONLF were also instruments of the irredentist Republic of Somalia and enjoyed its backing.

had soon after emerged as the burning question.<sup>43</sup>

The ESM was initially divided on the “correct” resolution of the national question. In the end, the ESM attempted to legitimate ethno-nationalism within the ideological compass of Marxism-Leninism, marking a radical departure from the inherited pan-Ethiopianist ideology.<sup>44</sup>

The ESM saw its resolution within the framework of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of "the right of nations to self-determination, up to and including secession." By 1971, the ESM worldwide adopted this doctrine. When the ESM gave birth to Marxist-Leninist political parties, notably *Mela Ityopia Socialist Niqinaqe* (MEISON) in 1968 and Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party (EPRP) in 1975, it also bequeathed them this doctrine. When the military junta adopted the Marxist-Leninist orientation of the ESM, it conspicuously rejected "the right of secession" doctrine. But other ethnonationalist organizations, including OLF and TPLF made "the right of nations to self-determination, up to and including secession," their organizing principle and *raison d'être*.<sup>45</sup> When EPRDF assumed power in 1991 in alliance with OLF and others, this doctrine became the basis for constructing a new federal state structure. Thus, ideological orientation and political necessity recommended ethnic federalism as a framework for

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<sup>43</sup> It should be noted that, outside the purview of intellectual movements, there were proto-ethnic, ethnonationalist, nationalist, peasant and/or pastoralist struggles on the ground: the Woyane revolt of the early 1940s, the Eritrean liberation movements of the early 1960s, revolts in Bale, Gojjam, Ogaden in association with Somalia irredentism, etc.

<sup>44</sup> Students at Addis Ababa University and abroad were principal formulators and advocates of the national question in the late 1960s / early 1970s. See Alem Habtu, “Reflections on the Ethiopian Student Movement in North America (1965-70): A Personal Account,” *Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on the Horn of Africa* (New York: Center for the Study of the Horn of Africa, 1987): 65-70; Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1974* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 1991) p. 225; Asafa Jalata, ed., *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse* (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>45</sup> After all, it is former students that also created these ethnonationalist organizations in the early to mid-1970s.

resolving issues of ethnic and regional autonomy and the right to self-determination while retaining the Ethiopian state.

### ***The Evolution and Structure of Ethnic Federalism***

The EPRDF-spearheaded multiethnic coalition convened a national conference in July 1991, and quickly established the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) under a transitional charter. Twenty-seven political groups participated in the charter conference.<sup>46</sup>

According to the preamble of the transitional charter, "self-determination of all the peoples shall be [one of] the governing principles of political, economic and social life" henceforth. It underlined the need to end all hostilities, heal (ethnic) wounds, and create peace and stability.<sup>47</sup>

The transitional charter affirmed the right of ethnic groups to self-determination, up to and including secession (Article 2)<sup>48</sup> and provided for the establishment of local and regional governments "on the basis of nationality" (Article 13). It also stipulated that "the Head of State, the Prime Minister, the Vice-Chairperson and Secretary of the Council of Representatives shall be from different nations / nationalities" (Article 9b).

The charter conference established an 87 -member Council of Representatives (COR), comprising "representatives of national liberation movements, other political organizations and prominent individuals" (Article 7). The COR acted as the national parliament for the two-and-

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<sup>46</sup> In addition, there were trade union and university representatives. For a list of the groups, see Aaron Tesfaye, *Political Power and Ethnic Federalism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 75. Some of the groups were created overnight on the eve of the conference.

<sup>47</sup> "Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia," (Addis Ababa, July 22, 1991), 1.

<sup>48</sup> "The right of nations, nationalities and peoples to self-determination is affirmed. To this end, each nation, nationality and people is guaranteed the right to ... exercise the right to self-determination of independence, when the

half-year transitional period. EPRDF had the largest voting bloc with 32 seats, followed by the Oromo Liberation front (OLF) with 12 seats.<sup>49</sup> The radical departure from the unitary policies of the two previous regimes provoked immediate opposition from pan-Ethiopian nationalists.<sup>50</sup> At the other extreme, the OLF bolted out of the transitional government in June 1992 and abandoned its participation in the upcoming district and regional elections, charging election fraud on the part of EPRDF and complaining that the provision for ethnic and regional autonomy enshrined in the Charter was not faithfully implemented.<sup>51</sup> In April 1993, EPRDF, which has ethnic constituents in (and rules) Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, and Southern regional states, ousted five Southern political groups (the “Southern Coalition”) for expressing sympathy with opposition groups meeting in Paris. Thus, by the time the constitution was crafted in 1995, EPRDF’s ethnic federal design, as well as its political legitimacy, was already under challenge in some critical quarters.<sup>52</sup>

The transitional COR established a Constitutional Commission to draft a constitution. It later adopted the draft and presented it for public discussion. Then, a Constituent Assembly ratified the federal constitution in December 1994, which came into force in August 1995. The

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concerned nation/nationality and people is convinced that the above rights are denied, abridged or abrogated." Ibid., 2.

<sup>49</sup> There was no explicit reason given for the seat allocations. They probably reflected the relative political and military strength of the attending parties.

<sup>50</sup> The late Professor Asrat Woldeyes, a well-known medical surgeon and founder of the All-Amhara People’s Organization, came to symbolize this opposition.

<sup>51</sup> See National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, *An Evaluation of the June 21, 1992 Elections in Ethiopia*, (National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 1992); Leenco Lata, *The Ethiopian State at the Crossroads: Decolonization & Democracy or Disintegration?* (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1999).

<sup>52</sup> Lata charges that "the process has in fact now ended in the restoration of a Dergue-like one-party regime instead of the pluralist democratic order that was originally envisaged" (ibid., xiii).



constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia starts with the words: “We the nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia.” This phrase indicates that all the ethnic groups as collectivities, rather than individual citizens are, in principle, the authors of the constitution. Thus, Ethiopia’s ethnic federalism is federalism based on ethnic communities<sup>53</sup> as the constituent units and foundations of the federal state.<sup>54</sup>

Comprising a preamble and eleven chapters, the constitution covered separation of state and religion, transparency and accountability of government, human and democratic rights, structure of the federal and regional states, and division of powers. Although Ethiopia is a multiethnic state, the preamble affirms that the Ethiopian peoples, "in full and free exercise of [their] right to self-determination" strongly commit themselves to build *one political community* and *one economic community* based on their *common interests, common outlook, and common destiny* (italics mine). These clauses were inserted in the preamble, after a long debate, in order to underscore the need for political and economic unity among the constituent ethnic groups and regions.<sup>55</sup>

In the remaining portion of this section, we will look at two important components of ethnic federalism: language pluralism, and regional autonomy. Language pluralism is important because it was one of the factors that created profound alienation for ethnic groups for whom the

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<sup>53</sup> According to Smith, an ethnic community (ethnie) “is a named human population with a myth of common ancestry, shared memories, and cultural element; a link with a historic territory or homeland; and a measure of solidarity.” Anthony D. Smith, “The Ethnic Sources of Nationalism,” *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, ed. Michael Brown (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 28-29.

<sup>54</sup> Ethnicity has been emphasized at the risk of undermining the concept of citizenship. For example, Addis Ababa is a federal city. But official identification requires ethnic identification, although the latter is irrelevant in a federal

dominant culture-*cum*-language was not their own, and because it is one indicator of pluralism in multiethnic societies. The regional autonomy subsection indicates specific ethnic and regional rights included in accommodating perceived demands of major ethnic groups.<sup>56</sup>

### *Language Pluralism*

There are more or less as many languages as ethnic groups in the country. In other words, there are more than 80 languages in Ethiopia (see Table 3 for the top two dozen languages). Nonetheless, as indicated in the previous section, cultural assimilation with Amharic as the language of instruction was the policy during the imperial, and to a lesser extent, the military periods. However, post-1991 Ethiopia's ethnic federalism is characterized by cultural pluralism, including language pluralism. Amharic is the working language of the federal government. In addition to Amharic, state television and radio media broadcast in Oromiffa and Tigrinya. But each regional state has the right to choose its own working language. In addition to Addis Ababa (the federal territory and capital) and Dire Dawa (federal territory), Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, and the polyglot Southern regional states have chosen Amharic as their working language.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Amharic is the second language of about 10 percent of population. By comparison, Oromiffa, the next major language in the country is the second language of only 3 percent of the population (see Table 3). In the Federal court system, the working language is

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city.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Kifle Wodajo, Chairman of the Constitutional Commission, summer 2001.

<sup>56</sup> Fiscal decentralization is an important component of Ethiopian federalism, but an examination of its features is beyond the scope of this paper. See Leulseged Ageze Zelelew, "Fiscal Decentralization and Development in Ethiopia: A Preliminary Assessment," (Paper No. 38. A Symposium for Reviewing Ethiopia's Socioeconomic Performance, 1991-1999. Addis Ababa: InterAfrica Group, 2000); Tesfaye, 116-128.

<sup>57</sup> Amharic is also the dominant market language. For example, most companies advertise on TV in Amharic more

Amharic; in the regional system, the working language is up to the region.

Table 3 about here

Each regional state can choose its own language of instruction in primary schools. Out of some 80 local languages spoken in the country, 19 are now used. Within each regional state, municipalities, zones and districts can choose their own language(s) of instruction. In Oromia regional state, for example, Adama (now the regional state capital), Amharic can be the language of instruction as much as Oromiffa. Within the Southern regional state, Guragigna, Sidamigna, Welaitigna, Hadiyigna, Gamogna, Gedeogna, Keffigna, or Kembatigna, etc. can be the language of instruction as much as Amharic in respective zones and districts. Due to lack of resources in the local language, including writing system, adequate teaching material, and teaching staff in the local language, many communities have chosen Amharic as their language of instruction. But, according to the federal Education Sector Development Program, more textbooks will be printed in local languages. In the Afar, Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz, Southern, and Oromia regional states, pilot nomadic schools and boarding schools have been established and/or planned in order to provide educational access, in most cases for the first time, to children in pastoral communities. Plans are also underway for Regional Education Media Units to design and transmit educational programs in local languages. Within the framework of the federal Education Sector Development Program, each regional state has produced its own educational development plan, and 87 percent of the program is to be implemented by the regional states themselves. They also have a considerable degree of financial autonomy subject to federal Ministry of Finance

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than in Oromiffa (Afan Oromo) or Tigrinya. Generally, Amharic has emerged as the lingua franca of Ethiopia.

oversight.<sup>58</sup>

### *Regional Autonomy*

The constitution established a federal republic comprising nine regional states created on the basis of predominant ethnic group, except the Southern regional state formed by 46 ethnic groups, and except two federal territories, Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa (See Table 4). It affirmed the unrestricted corporate right of all ethnic groups: “Every nation, nationality and people shall have the unrestricted right to self- determination up to secession” (Article 39).<sup>59</sup> The act of secession requires a two-thirds vote in the legislature of the seceding ethnic group to be followed three years later by a referendum in the seceding region. It does not require the approval of the federal legislature.

Table 4 about here

The House of Federation (upper house) is the guardian and interpreter of the constitution. It is the chamber in which “nations, nationalities, and peoples” (i.e., ethnic groups) are directly and proportionately represented. The House is composed of at least one representative from each of 67 ethnic groups in the country, and one additional representative for every one million population of each ethnic group. As a result, most ethnic groups are represented in the 112-member House of Federation. The Southern state (SNNP) with 46 ethnic groups has 54 representatives.<sup>60</sup> The two largest ethnic groups, the Oromo and the Amhara have 19 and 17 representatives, respectively; the politically dominant ethnic group, the Tigray, has 3

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<sup>58</sup> *Education Sector Development Action Plan* (Addis Ababa: Ministry of Education, 1999), 7-15.

<sup>59</sup> “Nation, nationality and people” assume pre-existing and mandate-giving entities.

representatives. It is noteworthy that the multiethnic federal territories of Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa have no representation in the House of Federation.<sup>61</sup>

The constitution provides considerable executive, legislative and judicial authority to regional states. “All powers not given expressly to the Federal Government alone, or concurrently to the Federal government and the States are reserved to the States” (Article 52). Each of the nine regional states has its own constitution, flag, executive government, legislature, judiciary, and police; it chooses its own working language; finally, it has the right to secession. The constitution also allows further decentralization from regional state to zonal and *woreda* (district) levels. Some constituent parts (e.g., ethnic zones) want their statuses upgraded to that of regional state, primarily because that is where executive power lies.

The constitution provides little guidance to management of federal-regional relations. Dealing with inter-state border disputes, Article 48 stipulates settlement by bilateral agreement among the disputant states. If the parties fail to reach an agreement, the House of Federation will decide on the basis of settlement patterns and the wishes of the people concerned. Article 50 only stipulates the general need for mutual, reciprocal respect between federal and regional governments.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> The smallest ethnic group represented is the 1,526-strong Koma (FDRE Central Statistical Authority 1999, 42).

<sup>61</sup> The two are federal territories directly answerable to the federal government. Since specific ethnic communities do not inhabit them, they are deemed to have no right of ethnic representation. However, their inhabitants are represented in the House of Representatives. The federal House of Representatives (lower house) is elected on the basis of population size; the total number of representatives is 547.

<sup>62</sup> The federal government recently (2003) introduced a bill that gives discretionary authority to the federal government to intervene in regional states if it deems it necessary to do so for political, humanitarian or human rights reasons. Such a robust intervention authority would diminish regional state rights.

There is immense economic interdependence (grain, coffee, etc.) among the regional states, and between regional states and the federal state. There are also the beginnings of exchange of experiences (in education, health, soil and water conservation, etc.) among the regional states themselves. Generally, the federal government mediates relations among regional states. Relations between the federal government and regional governments and among regional governments have been relatively smooth thus far because one party, albeit a multiethnic coalition, dominates all levels of government either directly or indirectly through its allied ethnic parties. The ruling coalition, EPRDF, enjoys a monopoly of power at all levels of government, except in one (Hadiya) zone. EPRDF consists of three ethnic and one multiethnic organizations, namely, the TPLF, Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), and Southern Ethiopia Peoples Democratic Front (SEPDF). The structure within EPRDF provides equal votes for the four components in its central as well as executive committees. It has hegemonic control over EPRDF-allied ruling parties in the remaining five regions of the country (Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambela, Harari, and Somali).

### **A Preliminary Appraisal and Speculation on Future Prospects**

The EPRDF reconfigured the empire-state to create nine ethnic-based territorial units, to the great dismay of many people, especially among the Amhara elite, the *Staatsvolk* (state-bearing nationality) of Ethiopia. Ethnic nationality is assigned an “obligatory ascribed status” (to use Brubaker’s term). During their everyday transactions with government offices, Ethiopian citizens are required to state their ethnic affiliation, “correct” affiliation being one based on

identification with one of the 84 officially given ethnic categories. “Correct” identification itself is based on mother tongue or household language use or descent. The imposition of ascribed ethnic classification is a source of common complaint, among (de-ethnicized) urban folk who wish to self-identify as Ethiopian only and among those offspring who are from parents belonging to two different ethnic groups. Such institutionalized forms of ethnic categorization and division contribute to many citizens’ profound fear of state instability.

Ethnic federalism institutionalized ethnic groups as fundamental constituents of the state. It established them as social categories sharply distinct from the overarching category of citizenship.<sup>63</sup> Many citizens are worried that it might lead to the demise of the state altogether. Thus far, there is no evidence that new ethnic nationalisms have emerged in Ethiopia as a consequence of ethnic federalism, as they did in the former USSR.<sup>64</sup> But it is too early to entirely dismiss their emergence.

The federal constitutions of the USSR and Yugoslavia provided for secession, and both collapsed eventually, the collapse attributed, quite rightly, far more to communism than to the secession provision. But while Communist Parties controlled the politics of ethnic autonomy, there is no Communist Party in Ethiopia. Perhaps the ruling party (EPRDF) plays a functionally equivalent role. Nonetheless, it is a coalition of ethnic parties, not a monolithic party. A second

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<sup>63</sup> Valerie Bunce wrote that in their federal systems, communist regimes designed "virtually all the building blocks that are necessary for the rise of nationalist movements and the formation of states." Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 49.

<sup>64</sup> Negative ramifications of ethnic federalism, notably the brutal murder of many Amhara in Oromo areas did cause the creation of the All-Amhara Peoples Organization, perhaps indicating the reluctant emergence of Amhara ethnic

distinction is that in the Ethiopian case, the constitution provides for political pluralism. Indeed, 63 political parties (all of them ethnic and regional save six) were officially registered with the National Electoral Board by August 1996.<sup>65</sup> The Ethiopian constitution is also premised on liberal democratic conceptions of community and individual rights.<sup>66</sup>

During the recent Ethio-Eritrean border war (1998-2000), all ethnic groups, including those in border regions like Somali, Afar and Gambella, volunteered in large numbers to join the war effort. Tragic as it was, the conflict, nonetheless, demonstrated a genuine and high degree of pan-Ethiopian nationalism among members of diverse ethnic backgrounds. The OLF is the conspicuous exception in that it aligned itself with Eritrea during the border war.

EPRDF has been undergoing an organizational-*cum*-ideological crisis since 2001. In a series of party meetings in June 2001, OPDO and SEDPF as well as the five allied regional parties, complained publicly of TPLF/EPRDF “tutelage.” Its crisis was manifested in its employment of Leninist organizational practices while adopting pluralist principles. It may face a great challenge in sustaining the ethnic federal project unless it undergoes ideological and organizational changes. Only time will tell whether it can do so without severely undermining the integrity and political management of the federal structure. If the federal state were to be in grave danger or collapse, the military may once again seize power. But if the latter fractures along

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nationalism. Even then, it is not an ethnic nationalism aimed at state disintegration.

<sup>65</sup> Reproduced in Table form from FDRE National Election Board data in Kidane Mengisteab, “New Approaches to State Building in Africa: The Case of Ethiopia’s Ethnic-based Federalism,” *African Studies Review*, 40, 3 (1997): 123.

<sup>66</sup> However, there is little evidence of liberal democratic practice on the part of the government or, for that matter, most of the opposition. Government harassment of private media, for example, is well documented.



ethnic lines, we could witness a Yugoslavia-like scenario. Inasmuch as EPRDF is a coalition, it is different from the Communist party of the USSR or Yugoslavia. The viability and stability of the infant political system is dependent on its flexibility and adaptability. Contingent events will shape the outcome of the ethnic federal experiment. In any case, the experiment is politically fragile.

Salih and Markakis<sup>67</sup> see decentralization in Ethiopia as a way to democratization inasmuch as it enables more people to influence the political process. This is problematic, however, since the authors of decentralization are also wedded to the *modus operandi* of democratic centralism, inhibiting decentralization and democratization. EPRDF cadres' violation of the voting rights of citizens in Hadiya zone, Southern regional state in the 2000 elections was well documented.<sup>68</sup> Given "democratic centralist" practice, democratization would be extremely difficult to realize, despite the principles of political pluralism enshrined in the constitution.<sup>69</sup> There is a mismatch between the liberal-democratic political-pluralist elements of the constitution and the political praxis of the dominant party.

Ethnic federalism has created conditions conducive to ethnic and regional autonomy in language and culture and in administrative, fiscal, judicial and police decentralization. Regime

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<sup>67</sup> M. A. M. Salih and John Markakis, 8.

<sup>68</sup> Despite EPRDF cadres' rigging, intimidation and violence, HNDO [Hadiya National Democratic Organization], became the first opposition party to ever win an election in an ethnic zone over the ruling party. See K. Tronvoll, "Voting, violence and violations: peasant voices on the flawed elections in Hadiya, Southern Ethiopia," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 39, 4 (2001): 697-716.

<sup>69</sup> For an excellent study of this challenge at the *woreda* level, see Mehret Ayenew, "Decentralization in Ethiopia: Two Case Studies on Devolution of Power and Responsibilities to Local Authorities," *Ethiopia: The Challenge of Democracy from Below*, eds. Bahru Zewde and Siegfried Pausewang (Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Studies, 2002), 130-146.

supporters point to the fact that most ethnic groups appear willing to live within the framework of the federal system as an important achievement of ethnic federalism.<sup>70</sup> It is probably the case that some ethnic groups (e.g., Somali) that ordinarily would not have supported the government are hinging their support, alliance, and/or membership in the state structure on the basis of the secession provision. Ethnic federalism has also contributed to creating conditions conducive to ethnic conflict, though not secession.<sup>71</sup> The major organization advancing the cause of secession is the OLF.

One condition under which ethnic federalism can survive, even acquire vibrancy, is if currently dominant ethnic parties within EPRDF (i.e., TPLF, ANDM, OPDO, and SEPDF) openly tolerate competing political parties in their respective regional areas. In this connection, it is noteworthy that in the Hadiya zone, Southern regional state, an opposition party won elections in 2000. But it won despite EPRDF's violence and intimidation, not because of appropriate conditions for competitive elections. A second condition is for EPRDF to open up membership in its coalition to other ethnic or multiethnic parties (e.g., Afar, Somali, Harari, Benishangul-Gumuz) that are allied to it, and to do so on an equitable footing or proportional basis. A third condition is for EPRDF to transform itself from a coalition of ethnic parties to one national (meta-ethnic) party of citizens. This last possibility will have serious ramifications for the ethnic

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<sup>70</sup> It is possible, however, that the achievement may be more a function of the durability of the Ethiopian state with its long history of central authority recognized in the popular culture and imagination of most inhabitants in a meta-ethnic way.

<sup>71</sup> Some ethnonationalist organizations seek secession, including the OLF and the ONLF. But they had sought secession even prior to establishment of the federal system. Simply, ethnic federalism has not dissuaded them from pursuing secession.

basis of the federal system; in a nutshell, it is likely to make the state less federal and more unitary. Perhaps, as a precursor to the last option, there is now a suggestion that any citizen can join any of the EPRDF ethnic parties regardless of ethnic membership.<sup>72</sup>

As indicated earlier, ideological orientation and political necessity recommended ethnic federalism as a framework for resolving issues of ethnic diversity and the right to self-determination. If this federal experiment fails, no one knows what the future holds. Whether a nation-wide consensus on some other form of federalism could be forged is unknown. A return to some form of unitary state would be improbable, as many ethnic groups and regions, notably Oromia, Afar, and Somali, are likely to object strenuously to such an outcome. As the saying goes, “the genie is out of the bottle.” Alternatively, the military may once again seize power. But if the military itself fractures along ethnic lines, we could witness a Yugoslavia-like scenario. All that can be concluded provisionally is that the viability and durability of ethnic federalism is indeterminate. Contingent events (such as whether or not there is equitable power sharing among ethnic groups, equitable revenue-sharing between federal and regional states, further democratization, and rapid economic and educational development) will shape the outcome of the politically fragile ethnic federal experiment. The success of the experiment is contingent on the ruling party’s willingness and capacity to disengage itself from democratic centralism, extend and deepen the democratization process, reduce poverty, ensure a sustained economic growth rate, and expand educational coverage. It is a tall order, and the capacity of the ruling party,

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<sup>72</sup> For example, non-Oromo could join OPDO, non-Tigray could join TPLF, and non-Amhara could join ANDM. In such an event, the direction would be towards a territory-based (in contradistinction to an ethnic-based) federation.

perhaps any party, to fill it is doubtful indeed.

Thus far, ethnic federalism has effectively undercut the drive for secession by ethnonationalist organizations by largely denying them manifest ethnic oppression as a rallying cause.<sup>73</sup> Through its pronouncement of ethnic and regional autonomy, ethnic federalism has managed to maintain the integrity of the Ethiopian state. The proclamation of ethnic autonomy has dampened grievances based on deprecation of denigrated languages and cultures. At the same time, the move toward cultural pluralism has inevitably increased ethnically inspired hostility between previously dominant and dominated ethnic groups as all are forced to adjust to new terms of interethnic relationships. Therefore, in the short run, the drive toward cultural pluralism has necessarily intensified inter-ethnic discord instead of cultivating ethnic harmony. In the long run, however, it has the potential to enhance ethnic harmony and equality based on mutual respect and reciprocity; at least, amelioration of ethnic conflict and inequality is not impossible. The complex and fluid situation now has elements of both intensification and amelioration of ethnic conflict. In any event, the success of the Ethiopian experiment is far from assured. If it succeeds, it may encourage others to move in the direction of ethnic federalism. If it fails (e.g., civil war or actual state disintegration), it may serve as a warning of what form of state to avoid.

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<sup>73</sup> There is no drive for secession in Tigray any longer. The Afar are not fighting for secession although some would like to forge a pan-Afar political entity comprising their numbers in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Although there are Somali in Ethiopia fighting for secession, they appear to have been undercut by EPRDF-allied Somali organizations on the basis of the constitutional right to secession. There are no secession movements to speak of in the Southern, Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz regions. Although Oromo nationalism is alive and well, OLF's drive for secession has not won the hearts and minds of the Oromo people who now enjoy their own state. On the other hand, OPDO does not enjoy popularity or legitimacy among the Oromo. Even within the organization, "the cream has left OPDO," as one Oromo informant put it to me. Generally, the ethnic parties in power are in a vicious cycle. They have uneducated (some would say lumpen) cadres; the educated do not want to join them.

## Conclusion

The Ethiopian state historically evolved, over millennia, as a non-colonial empire-state. The country has a great ethnic diversity. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, imperial assimilationist policies and military communist policies failed to overcome ethnic alienation and revolt. The leadership since 1991 institutionalized ethnic federalism as a matter of ideological orientation and political necessity and as a way of resolving conflict between ethnonationalism and the state. The fact that most ethnic groups appear willing to live within the framework of the federal system is, in part, an achievement of ethnic federalism. Thus far, ethnic federalism has undercut the drive for secession by largely removing manifest aspects of ethnic oppression (e.g., language use) that would have served as a rallying cause for ethnonationalist organizations. Through its cultural pluralist and political autonomy policies, ethnic federalism has contributed to state maintenance.

The Ethiopian federal system is unique in its constitutional marrying of political pluralism and the right of secession. But there is a mismatch between the liberal-democratic political-pluralist elements of the constitution and the political praxis of the dominant party; it is wedded to the *modus operandi* of democratic centralism, inhibiting effective decentralization and democratization.

In the short run, the viability and stability of the infant political system is dependent on its flexibility and adaptability. In the long run, the success of ethnic federalism will be contingent, in good measure, on a more balanced share of power between the three major ethnic groups, the Oromo, the Amhara and the Tigray. At the moment, it appears to be in favor of the numerically

small Tigray ethnic group. All three ethnic groups not only need to work out a mutual accommodation, they also need, in turn, to support pluralist policies and practices vis-à-vis all ethnic groups in the country. At the interstate level, Ethiopia needs to establish normal relations with all its neighboring states as there are co- ethnics residing in all of them.

**Table 1**      **Distribution of Ethnic Groups (100, 000 +) in Ethiopia, 1994**

<b>Ethnic Group</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>% of Total Population</b>
Oromo	17,080,318	32.1
Amhara	16,007,933	30.1
Tigraway	3,284,568	6.2
Somali	3,160,540	5.9
Guragie	2,290,274	4.3
Sidama	1,842,314	3.5
Welaita	1,269,216	2.4
Afar	979,367	1.8
Hadiya	927,933	1.7
Gamo	719,847	1.4
Gedeo	639,905	1.2
Keffa	599,188	1.1
Kembata	499,825	0.9
Agew/Awingi	397,491	0.7
Kulo	331,483	0.6
Goffa	241,530	0.5
Bench	173,123	0.3
Kemant	172,327	0.3
Yemsa	165,184	0.3
Agew/Kamyr	158,231	0.3
Ari	155,002	0.3
Konso	153,419	0.3
Alaba	125,900	0.2
Gumuz	121,487	0.2
Jebelawa	118,530	0.2
Koyra	107,595	0.2
All Others (incl. 53 ethnic groups)	1,409,766	3.0
Total	53,132,296	100.0

Source: FDRE Central Statistical Authority, The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia Results at Country Level Volume II Analytical Report. Addis Ababa: CSA, June 1999, pp. 41-43.

**Table 2      Distribution of Religions in Ethiopia, 1994**

<b>Religion</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>% of Total Population</b>
Orthodox	26,877,660	50.6
Protestant	5,405,107	10.2
Catholic	459,548	0.9
Muslim	17,412,431	32.8
Traditional	2,455,053	4.6
Others	478,226	0.9
Not Stated	42,756	0.1
Total	53,132,296	100.0

Source: FDRE Central Statistical Authority, The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia Results at Country Level Volume II Analytical Report. Addis Ababa: CSA, June 1999, p. 56.



**Table 3 Distribution of Mother Tongues (100, 000 +) and Second Languages in Ethiopia, 1994**

<b>Mother Tongue</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>% of Total Population</b>	<b>Second Language Pop.</b>	<b>% of Total Population</b>
Amharic	17,372,913	32.70	5,104,150	9.61
Oromiffa	16,777,976	31.58	1,535,434	2.89
Tigrinya	3,224,875	6.07	146,933	0.28
Somali	3,187,053	6.00	95,572	0.18
Guragigna	1,881,574	3.54	208,358	0.39
Sidamigna	1,876,329	3.53	101,340	0.19
Welaitigna	1,231,673	2.32	89,801	0.17
Afarigna	965,462	1.82	22,848	0.04
Hadiyigna	923,958	1.74	150,889	0.28
Gamogna	690,069	1.30	24,438	0.05
Gedeogna	637,082	1.20	47,950	0.09
Keffigna	569,626	1.07	46,720	0.09
Kembatigna	487,655	0.92	68,607	0.13
Agew/Awingiga	356,980	0.67	64,425	0.12
Kulogna	313,228	0.59	19,996	0.04
Goffigna	233,340	0.44	33,449	0.06
Benchigna	173,586	0.33	22,640	0.04
Arigna	158,857	0.30	13,319	0.03
Konsogna	149,508	0.28	5,658	0.01
Agew/Kamyrgna	143,369	0.27	11,026	0.02
Alabigna	126,257	0.24	25,271	0.05
Gumuzigna	120,424	0.23	4,379	0.01
Jebelawigna	116,084	0.22	15,738	0.03
Koyrigna	103,879	0.20	2,371	0.00

Source: FDRE Central Statistical Authority, The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia Results at Country Level Volume II Analytical Report. Addis Ababa: CSA, June 1999, pp. 46-48.

**Table 4 Population of Ethiopia by Regional State, and No. of Ethnic Groups in Each Regional State, 2001 (in thousands)**

Regional States	Population	No. Ethnic Groups
Tigray	3,901	3
Afar	1,272	1
Amhara	17,205	5
Oromia	23,704	1*
Somali	3,898	1
Benishangul-Gumuz	565	5
SNNP	13,293	46
Gambella	222	4
Harari	172	1**
Addis Ababa	2,646	Not Applicable
Dire Dawa	342	Not Applicable
Total	67,220	67

Source: FDRE Central Statistical Authority, *Ethiopia Statistical Abstract 2001*. Addis Ababa: CSA, March 2002, p. 24; FDRE House of Federation Secretariat Current List. 2002. Addis Ababa: House of Federation Secretariat.

\*It is indeed puzzling that only the Oromo are represented from Oromia regional state. The Oromo population numbered some 17 million, according to 1994 Census. In 2001, the population for Oromia regional state is given as 23.7 million. Even taking into account normal population growth rate (3%), it means a few million inhabitants in Oromia regional state are non-Oromo. Yet they have no representation in the House of Federation.

\*\* The Oromo are the numerical majority in Harar, closely followed by the Amhara. Yet, they have no representation in the House of Federation. The ruling Harari ethnic group constitutes less than 10 percent of the population in the regional state. See also Asmelash Beyene 1997, p. 14 cited in Aklilu Abraham and Asnake Kefale, "Federalism and Decentralization in Ethiopia: Emerging Patterns and Problems," a paper prepared for a Workshop on "The View from Below: Democratization and Governance in Ethiopia," (Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Studies, 2000).