Ethnic Federalism and Self-Determination for Nationalities in a Semi-Authoritarian State: the Case of Ethiopia

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1. Introduction

Together with a large part of the states on the African continent, Ethiopia struggles with a double challenge: how to accommodate an ethnically diverse population and at the same time enhance democracy. Many African states have introduced territorial and non-territorial measures to accommodate their ethnically diverse populations, ranging from federalism in Nigeria, to the moderate regional devolution in South Africa, and the unbalanced union of Zanzibar and Tanganyika in Tanzania. It seems, however, that Ethiopia has gone further than any of these countries in promoting ethnic diversity through a federal system which is explicitly based on ethnicity. The main idea is to give ethnic groups, termed "nations, nationalities and peoples" the right to self-determination, which also includes the right to secession if certain conditions are fulfilled. Sovereignty is not given to the member states of the federation, as is common in other federal systems, but "[a]ll sovereign powers resides in the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia" (Article 8.1). All languages are given equal state recognition (Article 5.1), and every national group has the right to develop and promote its own culture and preserve its own history (Article 39.2). Finally, they are entitled to a full measure of self-government including their own institutions within their territories and representation in regional and federal governments (Article 39.3).

But in spite of the extensive constitutional devolution of power to ethnic groups in Ethiopia, the ruling government holds a firm grip on political affairs in the country. Through the centralised party organisation of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), regional and local autonomy is undermined and opposition party activities are severely restricted. The ruling party’s unwillingness to share power was exposed after the 2005 general elections, when the opposition’s unprecedented progress led the incumbent to detain the opposition leadership and charge them with treason. So Ethiopia falls clearly into the category of semi-authoritarian states: the rulers accept liberal democracy rhetorically, but the system

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has apparent illiberal or authoritarian traits. The political situation in Ethiopia implies therefore an apparent paradox: the regime is falling short of democracy, while at the same time claiming to accommodate its various ethnic groups in a sustainable way through a federal system. Central theorists on federalism support the argument that stable multiethnic federations presume democracy and constitutionalism. Federalism in itself is not enough to mitigate ethnic conflict, but needs to be reinforced by other factors, both institutional and societal. In this article, I will demonstrate the difficulties Ethiopia faces in its efforts to accommodate ethnic groups in a peaceful way while maintaining a non-democratic form of government.

2. Two Preconditions for Mitigating Ethnic Conflict in Federal States

Several scholars of federalism stress contextual factors rather than variations in institutional design as decisive for success or failure in regulating ethnic conflict. The most fundamental contextual precondition for a stabilising federal system is the presence of a democratic government. Evidently, a federation cannot be genuine if it is a result of coercion from above, because coercion undermines the federal division of power and the self-rule of member states. The Soviet and Yugoslav federations should therefore not be considered as genuine, because the unity of their ethno-regional parts was maintained from above through coercion. In addition, democracy should imply the respect for individual and group rights, which may provide the overarching common values of the state and may assure the recognition of minorities within minorities.

Another argument in federal theory is that without the idea of common citizenship, self-determination for ethnic groups is likely turned into claims of secession and finally leads to disintegration of federal states. In order to prevent ethnically based self-rule from leading to parochialism and fragmentation, space must also be given to the development of an overarching identity in addition to the ethnic one. People should have a loyalty to the ideas of both an overall citizenship and the more


narrow ‘indigeneship’. In times of disagreement between ethnic groups, the appeal to the idea of an overall citizenship may prevent the conflict from escalating into open ethnic fighting. The maintenance of the idea of an overall citizenship is however dependent on the existence of a state perceived to be neutral. If the state is seen as representing particular segments of the population or as favouring certain ethnic groups, unprivileged groups are not likely to feel loyalty to the state. It is crucial therefore that the state promotes an overall identity that can include the whole variety of ethnic groups within its borders and that its practice proves to be non-discriminatory.

The case of Ethiopia has to be evaluated with these two preconditions in mind. Does the Ethiopian context, its democratic credentials and its space for developing overarching identities, enable federalism to work as a mitigating force in conflicts between ethnic groups?

3. The EPRDF’s Rationale for Introducing Ethnic Federalism: Pacifying Ethnic Wars

The concept of ethnic federalism was introduced in Ethiopia in 1991 when the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power. The EPRDF, a coalition of four ethnically based parties which is created and dominated by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), had been fighting a war against a centralised and Amhara-dominated regime and gained support and legitimacy from ethnically based constituencies. The TPLF as a guerrilla movement was inspired by the Stalinist theory of nationalities, where ethnicity was seen as a natural and efficient principle of organising and mobilising the people, as long as it was led and directed by a strong vanguard party. When justifying the introduction of ethnic federalism, however, the EPRDF’s and TPLF’s leader and Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has claimed that all they were trying to do was to stop the war, and to prevent a new one erupting. He has argued that ethnic federalism was the only way of democratically restructuring the country, enhancing the political participation of the Ethiopian population and giving ethno-regional rights to the previously oppressed peoples or nationalities. In the EPRDF’s view, ethnic federalism was a response to the legacy of the ethnic domination and marginalisation in the history of the Ethiopian state and the need for a state reconstruction that delegitimised the old leadership elites. Federalism was not only a way of maintaining unity and preventing

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war, but also a means to overcome the Amhara hegemony and provide a structure in which the EPRDF could govern.  

During both Emperor Haile Selassie (1931–1974) and the military Marxist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam and the Derg (1974–1991), ethnic groups, cultures and languages were clearly ranked and ethnic movements oppressed. Inequality based on ethnic affinity has been a part of Ethiopian governance since the establishment of the modern state at the end of the 19th century, and the Amhara has been perceived as the ruling group. Adoption of Orthodox Christianity and the Amharic language was the only way to gain political power or be employed in the state administration. The Ethiopian national identity was therefore intrinsically linked to the Amhara. But despite Amhara dominance, Ethiopia was considered a successful nation state. Everyone could, at least in theory, be included in the state as long as they accepted assimilation into the Amhara culture. 

Although the Derg’s appeal to Marxism and a non-discriminatory policy towards ethnic groups, ethnically based opposition groups defined Mengistu’s government as an Amhara suppressor. The Derg’s policy towards ethnic groups was to allow, and even to stimulate, cultural articulation of ethnicity, but to suppress political expressions of it. In 1983, the Derg established the Institute of the Ethiopian Nationalities (ISEN) in order to provide the government with more knowledge about the national groups and projecting the process of constitutional drafting. With the Derg’s new Constitution of 1987, five out of thirty administrative regions, including Eritrea, Dire Dawa, Tigray, Assab and Ogaden, gained the status as autonomous. But the power prerogatives enjoyed by these regions were strictly delegated and not protected by any constitutional guarantees. The national groups became gradually more suppressed and less empowered than previously. Nevertheless, the new autonomy structures and the promotion of ethnic cultural expressions fostered the politicisation of ethnicity, lifting it up on the national political stage. Through the activities of the ethnically based liberation movements, ethnicity became the rallying point for the opposition against the Derg. It was inevitable therefore that ‘the national question’ would be an important part of the governance of the successor’s regime. When the EPRDF eventually came to power in 1991, it appeared reasonable to launch a governing system based on the principle of ethnic self-determination.

4. The Ethiopian Constitution’s Primordial Definition of Ethnicity

The conventional view on ethnicity in social science research today is that it is a constructed phenomenon, based on the selection of cultural markers and mobilised as a political force in the struggle for political power and resources. This constructivist

13 See P. Yeros, Ethnicity and Nationalism in Africa: Constructivist Reflections and Contemporary Politics (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 1999).
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approach is contrary to a primordialist view, where ethnicity is seen as something naturally inborn, fixed and stable. The early structural functionalist anthropologists and European colonialists' images of African ethnic identities are examples of primordialist approaches to ethnicity. They viewed African society as divided into clearly separated 'tribes' defined on the basis of objective cultural markers. But later anthropological and historical studies of African societies under colonial rule have demonstrated that the colonial indirect rule, based on official definitions of ethnicity, actually 'created' or at least rigidified ethnic identities, making them fixed instead of flexible.

The Ethiopian Constitution's definition of ethnic groups as clearly distinguishable cultural groups is akin to primordial ideas of ethnicity. Article 39.10 of the Ethiopian Constitution defines a nationality as "a group of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory". Since the whole population of the federation is seen as composed of nations, nationalities and peoples as defined above, it means that every citizen must belong to an ethnic group and define themselves along ethnic lines. As we have seen, the colonial indirect rule, with its official definition of ethnic identities as fixed and inborn, created and rigidified ethnic identities. Is it likely to expect that the Ethiopian federal system, also with a primordial approach to ethnicity, will do the same?

A common argument in theoretical discussions on federalism and ethnicity is that when ethnicity is the only acknowledged identity, other identities are subsequently downgraded. This may limit individual flexibility and choice, and may encourage parochialism and essentialism. It is argued that federal models based on ethnicity can be justified only when the basic rights of the citizens who have a different commitment to ethnicity, or have no commitment to it at all, are protected. This requirement is not in place in the Ethiopian model. According to the Constitution, there is nothing like a super-national category and it is therefore formally difficult to claim an all-Ethiopian or mixed ethnic identity. The Constitution also presumes that ethnic groups live in geographically concentrated areas, that ethnic groups are homogeneous, have the same interests and are equated with political units. This is far from the reality in Ethiopian society, where marriages across ethnic lines are common and ethnic groups have intermingled, creating large ethnically mixed populations.

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According to a constructivist approach, the importance and significance of ethnicity and its political expression is likely to change from time to time, all according to the current political and societal situation. As long as there is competition for control of the state’s resources, a constitutional clause giving every ethnic group the right to self-determination is likely to spur groups to come up with claims of their own administrative structure in order to have a greater share of the state’s resources. An ethnically based federal system must therefore be able to change its administrative structures along with the mobilisation of ethnic identities if it is going to fulfil its promises of ethnic self-determination. This requires a flexible government, willing to respond to upcoming demands, but also being able to appeal to the overall identity of the state and the individual rights of all citizens independent of ethnicity as a way of containing ethnic claims. The Ethiopian Constitution, with its primordial definition of ethnicity and its classification of all Ethiopians as ethnic citizens, may strain the flexibility of the system and in the end make the containment of ethnic demands a very difficult task.

5. The Formal Institutional Framework

The institutional framework of the Ethiopian federal system includes two contradictory elements. According to the Constitution, the regional governments have rather wide powers to run their own affairs and to implement their own policies. Contrary to this is the meagre financial resource-base of the regions and the strong powers of the central executive. Although all nine member states of the Ethiopian federation have executive, legislative and judicial powers, the regional powers are severely restricted by the fact that the “lion’s share” of the revenues in the country is assigned to the federal government, and the regional states are totally reliant on federal grants to perform their duties. Another factor restricting regional autonomy is that the regional governments must follow national standards on health, education and development, which are formulated by the federal government (Article 51.3).

The Ethiopian system is formally parliamentary, but has also elements of presidential systems. The highest authority of the federal state is the House of Peoples’ Representatives (HPR). The relationship between the House of Peoples’ only two of the federal units are ethnically homogeneous (Afar and Somali), while the majority consist of a majority and several minority groups (Tigray, Amhara, Oromyia, Benishangul-Gumuz and Harar). The Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS) is extremely heterogeneous, with more than fifty ethnic groups, see L. Aalen, Ethnic federalism in a dominant party state: the Ethiopian experience 1991–2000 (Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, Norway, 2001).


20 The members of the HPR are elected by a plurality of the votes cast in general elections every five years (Article 54.1). But twenty of the seats are exempted from the majority-based, one-member constituencies and are reserved for officially recognised ethnic groups with less than 100,000 people, in order to ensure minority representation.
Representatives and the executive is regulated by parliamentarian principles, and this altogether minimises the separation of powers and the checks and balances as seen for example in the U.S. Constitution.\textsuperscript{21} The Prime Minister has more power than what is common in parliamentary systems, due to the facts that he controls the army and that the council of ministers are accountable to him and not to the HPR. Taken together, this implies that the central executive’s powers are largely unrestrained by the control of other institutions.

The House of the Federation (HF) is the second or upper chamber of the parliament. In conventional federal systems, the second chamber serves as the representative institution for the regional units. In the Ethiopian system, the HF has essentially the same function, but in the Constitution this is formulated in a slightly different way: it is not composed of representatives from the federal units, but “of representatives of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” (Article 61.1).\textsuperscript{22} The House of the Federation has the power to interpret the Constitution, a power which is normally given to a constitutional court. The stated reason for giving the HF this power instead of a constitutional court is that the new regime wanted the nationalities to have a direct impact on their Constitution. A critique of this solution, however, is that constitutional interpretation is left in the hands of a political body, which has since the fall of the Derg in 1991 been dominated by one party. The impartiality and fairness of the constitutional interpretation should therefore be questioned. The HF has also the responsibility for dealing with issues of the nationalities and federal-regional relations, but unlike other parliamentary systems, the 2nd chamber has no power to check the 1st chamber or the executive or to propose laws for the federation. With only two sessions annually (Article 67), it has little influence on the conduct of daily federal affairs. This implies that the regions, through the House of the Federation, do not have any say in debating the general policies and legislation on the federal level. So all in all, the institutional framework of the Ethiopian federation provides plenty of room for a strong central executive led by the Prime Minister to operate. He is only to a small extent controlled or checked by the other institutions of the federation, such as the House of Peoples’ Representatives and the House of the Federation. This creates a good opportunity for the party in power to implement its policies and create legislation without the consultation of the regional governments, other political parties or the electorate at large.


\textsuperscript{22} All officially recognised ethnic groups have a special representation in the House of the Federation. Each nationality has one representative plus one extra for each million of its population. The numbers of nationalities in the House have been updated, since new groups are coming up with the claim to be represented. One example of this is the Silte group who got their own local administration and representation in the HF in 2000, after succeeding in separating from the larger Gurage group in the Southern region of the country, SNNPRS.
6. The EPRDF's Political Practice: Undermining Legitimacy and Trust in the Federal System

Although the structures of ethnic rank and suppression were formally eradicated in the new political order of 1991, suspicion across ethnic borders is still widespread. A popular perception today is that the Tigrayans are the new ruling ethnic elite and that they are attempting to monopolise political power and direct state resources to their own region in the north of the country. This perception gains strength from the fact that it is the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) which is the dominant force in the ruling EPRDF coalition. The TPLF was the creator of the coalition and the architect of the ethnic federal model, and TPLF leaders have since the fall of Mengistu had the most powerful positions in the country, including the post of Prime Minister.

The TPLF, through the EPRDF coalition, has not been able to demonstrate a genuine will to share power with other political forces in a democratic manner. Although the transitional conference that was held just after EPRDF came to power in 1991 included a wide spectrum of political parties, their views were hardly taken into consideration and the EPRDF's agenda for the transitional period was adopted largely unmodified. In 1994, the EPRDF totally dominated the drafting and ratifying of the new Constitution. The introduction of self-determination for the nationalities was done without a genuine consultation of the wider sections of the Ethiopian people, and there was little of a 'federal bargain', which according to federal theory is an essential part of a sustainable federal system. The military superiority of the TPLF and the control that they imposed during the transitional period made the opposition unable, both physically and politically, to reject the so-called federal bargain. In the end, the EPRDF's total dominance in the introduction of the new political order has severely damaged the legitimacy of the federal arrangement. As we have seen, the EPRDF justified the introduction of ethnic federalism by the aim of curbing ethnic conflicts and maintaining a united Ethiopia. A common interpretation of why the EPRDF introduced ethnic federalism, however, is that it was a way of ensuring the new ruling elite's position. By transforming the country into ethnically defined regional states and creating ethnically defined parties under its control, the leadership from the ethnic minority of Tigray was able to be in command of the whole country.

The EPRDF's strong position in the political system of Ethiopia is not only maintained by the space created for a strong central executive in the formal institutions of the federation. Its internal organisation and the way it is influencing the executive organs of the regional governments also contribute to a concentration of power in the hands of the central leadership of the ruling party. As a part of the legacy of the Marxist period of the liberation struggle, the EPRDF is working according to the principle of democratic centralism, where party officials at all levels are accountable to the hierarchy above. The EPRDF's network of member and affiliate parties

23 See Aalen, supra note 18.
controls the governments in all the regional states in the federation. \(^{25}\) Throughout the post-Derg period, the EPRDF has also informally deployed party cadres in all the regions. These are officially known as “advisors”, monitoring and assisting the EPRDF member parties or the affiliate parties in the regions, but do not have any formal positions or portfolios. The regional officials in the regular and formal administration are to a large extent accountable to these assigned party cadres and dependent on them to remain in their positions.\(^{26}\)

Another factor contributing to the strong position of the EPRDF is that the boundary between the party and the state bureaucracy is blurred. This enables the ruling party to utilise the state administration for its own purpose, from the federal all the way down to the local level.\(^{27}\) The court system is also under severe pressure from the ruling party. In times of elections, voters experience that if they do not vote for the ruling party, they will lose the benefits and services they have the right to obtain from the public administration.\(^{28}\) The dominant party rule with its centralised party structures and the blurred borders between state and party all contribute to undermining of the federal division of power. It promotes upward accountability to the party organs above rather than downward accountability to the people of the region, woreda (district) and kebele (the lowest administrative unit). Regional and local self-rule is therefore severely modified and “self-determination for the nationalities” is more of a paper provision than an actual principle of government practice.

\(^{25}\) The four member parties of the EPRDF, the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Front (SEPDF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) operate in the four regions of Oromiya, Amhara, SNNPRS and Tigray respectively. Currently, there are EPRDF affiliate parties in power in all the regional states not ruled by EPRDF members, and they also represent the regional governments in the federal institutions. These are the Afar People's Democratic Movement (APDO) in the Afar region, the Somali People's Democratic Front (SPDF) in Somali, the Gambella People's Democratic Front (GPDF) in Gambella, the Benishangul-Gumuz Peoples Democratic Unity Front (BGPDFU) in Benishangul-Gumuz, and the Harari National League (HNL) in Harari. The EPRDF has been instrumental in creating all the regional affiliates and is working closely with them. For details on the various regions, see Christine Gibbs, "Sharing the Faith - Religion and Ethnicity in the City of Harar," *Horn of Africa: An Independent Journal* 16 (1998), John Markakis, “The Somali in Ethiopia,” *Review of African Political Economy* 23 (1996), J. Young, “Along Ethiopia's Western Fronties: Gambella and Benishangul in Transition,” *Journal of Modern African studies* 37, no. 2 (1999).


\(^{27}\) During the last five to ten years, a new system of sub-kebele structures has been evolving throughout the country. Through this system, local administrators are able to control the rural population all the way down to five household units (Information obtained from interviews conducted in Addis Ababa March 2005). See also Human Rights Watch: *Suppressing dissent: Human rights abuses and repression in Ethiopia's Oromia Region*, 10 May 2005 <www.hrw.org> visited on 12 May 2005.

7. The 2005 Elections: Ethiopian Democracy Moving One Step Forward and Many Steps Backward

Since the EPRDF’s take-over in 1991, three elections to the national and regional parliaments have been held. The two first elections in 1995 and 2000 were marked by a lack of genuine competition between the incumbent and the opposition parties, and parts of the opposition were either boycotting or withdrawing from the processes which they described as fraudulent. Without real competitors, the EPRDF ended up with more than ninety five percent of the votes. But this seemed to be changing before the third national elections in May 2005. Two broader coalitions of opposition parties took part in the process, and it appeared that the hegemonic position of the EPRDF could be challenged. For the first time, all the contending parties were able to campaign and disseminate their programs through government owned national media.

The 2005 polls turned out to be the most contested in Ethiopian history, and the opposition parties, in particular the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) seriously challenged the incumbent. The CUD managed to capture a large majority of the votes in Addis Ababa and substantial shares of the votes in other major urban centres, while the other main opposition coalition, the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) took parts of the ballots in Oromiya and the Southern region. But the image of a new and freer political climate did not last for many days after the polls. On the eve of election day, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi declared a month long ban on demonstrations and out-door meetings, and made police and security forces in the capital directly under his command. Despite the opposition’s progress in the elections, the results of the polls were controversial and finally rejected by the two opposition coalitions, and the CUD decided to boycott the national parliament. Protests against alleged fraud took place in Addis Ababa and other towns both in June and November 2005, where more than a hundred protesters were killed and tens of thousands of opposition members and supporters were detained. In the aftermath of the November protests, the government detained the CUD leadership together with a number of independent journalists and civil society leaders. The charges against them included treason, inciting violence and planning to commit genocide.

29 The final election results showed that the EPRDF and its allies had obtained 371 out of 547 (67.8%) of the seats in the national parliament, the House of People’s Representatives, while the opposition got 174 seats (31.8%), including 109 seats for CUD, 52 seats for UEDF and 11 for OFDM. The two remaining opposition seats went to the small Sheko and Mezenger People’s Democratic Unity Organisation (SMPDUO) from Southern region and one independent candidate, the Ethiopian ex-president Negasso Gidada (National Electoral Board, Press release, 5 September 2005).

30 The government confirmed that 3000 people had been arrested only in Addis Ababa in June (Information Minister Bereket Simon in Addis Tribune, 24 June 2005), while Human Rights Watch and Ethiopian Human Rights Council, among others, claimed that the numbers were much higher countrywide, due to mass arrests in at least nine towns outside Addis Ababa. (See Human Rights Watch, Ethiopia: crackdown spreads beyond capital, New York, 15 June 2005). No exact numbers of detainees were published by the government after the November protests. Other sources reported more than 20,000 detainees in only one of the detention camps, the Dedesa camp in Oromiya (Sub-Saharan Informer, 18 November 2005).

31 By the end of February 2006, the defendants have still not been sentenced. It appears that the government applies a deliberate strategy of delaying the process, in order to buy time to clamp down on further protests.
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Since November 2005, the majority of all independent newspapers in the country have stopped coming out as their editors are imprisoned or have gone into hiding.

The issue of self-determination for national groups and the ethnically based federal system is a major conflict line in current Ethiopian politics, and was accordingly at the centre of the debates in the 2005 election campaign. The Coalition for Unity and Democracy, a coalition of four parties, is based on some of the same constituencies as the first strong opponent to the ethnic federal system, the All Amhara People’s Organisation (AAPO), which was established in 1992.32 The CUD claims to favour a federal system, but not on ethnic grounds, and wants thus to abolish Article 39 of the Constitution. The other opposition coalition, the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) which consists of five domestic and nine diaspora parties, has taken a midway position on the question of the rights of the nationalities. While favouring a political system based on ethnic lines, it opposes the right to secession. In the elections, the UEDF failed to capture as many votes as the CUD, and one of the explanations for this may be its stand on the issue of the nationalities. In a polarised political environment, midway positions are always hard to communicate, and the electorate may fail to see that a third policy alternative has something to offer.

The campaigns and debates in the last weeks before the 2005 elections were marked by aggressive propaganda and hate-speech, particularly from the ruling party in defence of the rights of the nationalities and the ethnically based federal system. CUD became the main target of the propaganda. It was considered the strongest enemy because of its refusal to accept to Article 39 of the Constitution. By taking this position, CUD had attacked the raison d’être of the EPRDF’s political system, the rights of nationalities to self-determination up to and including secession. When it was clear that the ‘anti-nationality’ CUD also had managed to mobilise people to vote for them, it was no longer only an ideological enemy, but emerged as a real threat to the persistence of the EPRDF rule as well. The EPRDF’s verbal attack on CUD was twofold. Firstly, CUD policies were described as a direct continuation of the oppressive policies of the previous Amhara dominated regimes of Haile Selassie and the Derg.33 Secondly, and even more radically, CUD’s policy on the rights of national groups was depicted as an attempt at introducing the genocidal policies of the Interhamwe in Ethiopia. The Interhamwe is the name of the Hutu-extremists that initiated the genocide of 800,000 Tutsies and moderate Hutus in Rwanda in 1994.34

32 One of CUD’s member parties, the All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP), is the direct successor of AAPO. The AAPO renamed itself as AEUP in 2002. AEUP is the largest party in the coalition and AEUP’s chairman Hailu Shawa is the chairman of CUD.
33 Here are some examples of such rhetoric: “CUD is not different from the mere Derg’s Worker’s Party. Thus they oppose Article 39 of the Constitution . . . CUD has planned to destroy this constitutional system and abolish the Constitution” (the EPRDF’s campaign on Ethiopian TV, 2 April 2005) and “The war is their zeal and the Derg regime is the state that they want to re-establish” (the EPRDF’s campaign on Ethiopian TV, 15 April 2005).
34 “The opposition parties, which are proponents of the Interhamwe, want to destroy differences and form mixtures. They raise conflicts between people. Voting for the opposition brings a worse genocide than that of Rwanda . . . If Interhamwe is voted in urban centres, cities will become arenas of chaos, development will stagnate and genocide will take place.” (The EPRDF’s campaign on Ethiopian TV, 22 April 2005).
In parallel with these verbal attacks, members and supporters of CUD and other opposition parties were harassed and detained, particularly in rural areas and in urban centres outside the capital.\(^{35}\)

The ruling party’s use of the rhetoric of *Interhamwe* and genocide appeared not only as an attempt to stamp out the opposition, but also as a move to wake up the ruling group’s own constituency in the Tigray region. A side-effect of this was that it strengthened anti-Tigrayan sentiments through the image of the Tigray group as standing alone against the rest of the Ethiopian people.\(^{36}\) As the increasing support for CUD in most urban parts of Ethiopia became evident in the run-up to the election, it was apparent that the incumbent tried to mobilise the Tigrayans in order to contain the progress of CUD and ensure that they would stay in power also after the elections. So the TPLF tried to rally the people of Tigray behind it by instigating a collective fear of losing ground if another party came to power, with the logic; if you do not vote for us, you will be doomed. The rhetoric of the opposition as the *Interhamwe* of Ethiopia served thus to substantiate this logic – the Tigrayans, like the Tutsi of Rwanda, would be eradicated if the opposition came to power.

Considering the incumbent’s clamp-down on the leaders, members and supporters of CUD in the aftermath of the November protests, its rhetoric against the opposition in the pre-election period appears in yet another light. It seems that the harsh language in the pre-election campaign not only aimed at scaring the electorate to vote for the ruling party, but may also have been intended to serve the purpose of legitimising a possible crackdown on the opposition after the elections. Since election day, the government issued frequent statements warning that it would never tolerate any attempts to create chaos, anarchy or the undermining of constitutional order. In some of the statements, CUD and its members were stamped out as extremists intending illegal acts, and the pre-election rhetoric portraying CUD as the *Interhamwe* of Ethiopia was repeated.\(^{37}\) The arrests and charges of treason, violence and genocide raised against CUD leaders came as a logical consequence of previous rhetoric. In the view of the government, the proponents of anti-ethnic policies had to be restrained in order to save the country from emerging into ethnic wars.


\(^{36}\) There were also a few attempts of promoting anti-Tigrayan feelings from the opposition side. Some statements from CUD representatives were interpreted as anti-Tigrayan, even though it was not clear whether the speakers intended to spark this issue or not. An example of this was the CUD representative Bedru Adem’s speech on the CUD mass rally one week before the elections in Addis Ababa. In front of a cheering crowd of around two million people gathered at the largest public square in the capital, he said: “Must the ruling group return to where they came from and be knocked out!” (CUD’s Bedru Adem quoted in Asqual newspaper, 10 May 2005). In a context where anti-Tigrayan emotions may run high, this statement is easily interpreted as saying that the TPLF and its fellow Tigrayans should leave the national power in Addis Ababa and go back to Tigray.

\(^{37}\) See several statements from the Ministry of Information, among them a statement entitled “Our democracy is meant to serve the interests of our peoples and never to accommodate anarchy” (Ethiopian Herald, 5 June 2005).
The aftermath of the 2005 elections confirms in many ways the EPRDF’s lack of will to permit genuine democracy in Ethiopia. It demonstrates that the ruling party is willing to allow opposition up to a certain point—only as long as it does not pose a real danger to the EPRDF’s dominant position. “When you tie a hen with a long rope, she may think that she is released” said Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in an interview on national television before the elections, quoting a traditional Amharic proverb. He implied that the EPRDF had liberalised the conditions for the opposition ahead of the 2005 polls, allowing a larger space of movement but not with the aim of opening up completely. Like other semi-authoritarian regimes, the EPRDF is determined to maintain the appearance of democracy without exposing itself to the political risks that free competition entails. But in the polls, the opposition exploited the opening that was created, and contrary to the EPRDF’s expectations, the people followed, at least in urban areas, voting the ruling party out of office.

8. Can a Pan-Ethiopian Identity Prevent Disintegration?

Due to EPRDF’s grip in every corner of the country and its suppression of opposition, it can be argued that the Ethiopian federation, like the Soviet and Yugoslav federations, is maintained by force. It remains to be seen whether a regime change in Ethiopia will lead to disintegration, as it happened in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. But the modern Ethiopian state has by contrast to the Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia a pre-federation history of territorial and administrative unity, and this might in the end prevent disintegration from taking place. Throughout Ethiopian history, the various political forces which have challenged the central power have always aimed at capturing the centre in order to have a larger share of the central resources, and have not attempted to exit from the Ethiopian state. The ‘glue’ of the Ethiopian federation may continue to be the struggle for control of the centre, to be ranked at the top and be in charge of the central resources. During the previous regimes, the key to get access to central resources was to acquire an ‘All-Ethiopian’ identity and be assimilated into the central culture by learning the Amhara language and becoming a follower of Orthodox Christianity. So it can also be argued that the Ethiopians, unlike the peoples of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, have a stronger common identity, an idea of an overarching citizenship that transcends ethnic identities, which can be called upon to prevent disintegration. This identity is rooted in Ethiopia’s survival as the only country on the African continent that was

38 Ethiopian Television, exclusive interview with the Ethiopian Prime Minister on 5 May 2005.
39 Ottaway, supra note 2.
40 The difference between the Ethiopian and the Soviet/Yugoslav federations, is corresponding to the contrast between a ‘holding-together’-federation where a unitary state divides powers to maintain a union and a ‘coming-together’-federation, where formerly independent states go together (voluntarily or involuntarily). Linz argues that the former type of federation is the most stable, see J. J. Linz, “Democracy, Multinationalism and Federalism,” in Demokraties in Ost Und West, ed. W Busch and A. Merkel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999).
not colonised by foreign powers. The image of Ethiopia as an historical exception on the African continent is also strengthened by the country's early adoption of Christianity, imperial rule, written language and plough agriculture. But a fundamental problem with the historically entrenched Ethiopian identity is nevertheless that it is constructed from the Amhara dominated elite's point of view. The cultures of the peripheral people's of the south, west and east of the country are not included in this identity. If this identity is going act as a protection to disintegration it needs a fundamental redefinition and renegotiation. An all-Ethiopian identity must reflect the diversity of the Ethiopian population in addition to focusing on Ethiopia as an historical exception on the African continent.

Another factor that contributes to the undermining of the idea of an overall Ethiopian citizenship is that under the regime of the EPRDF, the key to get access to the resources of the central government is to acquire a separate ethnic identity and an ethnically defined administrative structure. Through its governing practices, the EPRDF, and particularly the TPLF, has not done enough to make the Ethiopian state appear ethnically neutral. The anti-Tigrayan sentiments in the 2005 elections indicate that large scale ethnic tension is latent, and may run into open confrontations in the future. The widespread mistrust to both the ruling elite and the state is undermining the people's image of the state as a guarantor of the rights of all citizens, independent of ethnic identity. This may in the long run prevent a redefinition of the Ethiopian identity to become inclusive instead of exclusive and hinder the development of a sustainable pan-Ethiopian identity, which can act as a bulwark against claims of secession and disintegration.

9. Ethnic Entrepreneurship and Local 'Ethnic' Conflict

Ethiopia is in a situation where democracy and the idea of an inclusive and overall citizenship, the two main pre-conditions for mitigating ethnic conflicts in federal states, are clearly undermined. According to federal theory, this situation is likely to lead to increased levels of ethnic tension, and in the worst scenario, to disintegration of the federation. So, what is the situation on the ground in Ethiopia today? After 14 years of 'ethnic self-determination' in Ethiopia, what is the status of ethnic groups and the relationship between them?

On the positive side, some achievements regarding the rights of minorities have been made since the introduction of ethnic federalism. Previously neglected or oppressed minorities have gained confidence in their own language and culture and have obtained their own administration. The majority of the Ethiopian people have the chance to speak their own language in education and administration and are, at least in theory, able to take part in governmental affairs in their ethnic community like never before. A major attainment for people in their everyday life is that when they take a case to court they are able to follow the procedures in their own language.

For an example of an apparently improved situation for smaller ethnic groups, see E. Watson, 'Capturing a Local Elite: The Konso Honeymoon', in W. James et al., Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and After (James Currey, Oxford, 2002).
When comparing the situation of ethnic liberation struggles during the previous regimes, it seems however that the most important achievement of the current system is the absence of destabilising ethnic conflicts on the state level. Contrary to predictions that can be reasonably derived from federal theory, the federation has not disintegrated, but has remained unified. Compared to the situation under the regimes of Haile Selassie and the Derg, ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia today are not taking place on the larger national scene, threatening the survival of the Ethiopian state, but are mostly scaled down to the local level. Although the Constitution provides all nationalities with the right to secession, it is apparent that this right would not be allowed to be exercised under the current regime. But at least formally, the largest ethnic groups have obtained regional self-rule and their leaders are co-opted into the centralised party system. Their cases are in this way settled, even though the genuineness of their self-determination should be questioned due to the intervention of centralised ruling party.

In contrast to the larger ethnic groups, many smaller ethnic groups are still fighting for self-administration. Minority groups within the federal member states have a constitutional right to establish a state within the state. But since Ethiopia has more than 80 officially recognised ethnic groups, many of them very small, the right to self-determination is most likely to be solved practically by giving groups their own zone or special woreda (district) administration at the local level within the member states of the federation. This means that most ethnically based struggles are scaled down to zone and woreda level, where ethnic groups have a chance to gain their own administrative structures. If a group succeeds in claiming a separate identity, they have a constitutional right to gain a separate administrative unit. By having their own administration they get access to their own budget, granted mainly through transfers from the federal level via the regional governments. Numerous conflicts at the local level have erupted over the issues of administrative borders and representation of ethnic groups in local governmental bodies. Members of the local educated elite have been the primary advocates of ethnic politics at the lower level. In many areas they have re-negotiated local relationships and mobilised people to fight for recognition as ‘nationality’ or ethnic group in order to take advantage of the new political order. Acting as ‘ethnic entrepreneurs’, they use the constitutional status of nationalities to pursue their goals. The processes at the local level in Ethiopia has

42 The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), with Ethiopia’s largest ethnic groups, the Oromo, as its constituency, has been fighting for an independent Oromyia. The organisation has been banned and open fighting between the government army and the OLF has occurred many times since 1992. Supporters of the OLF are persecuted and are victims of extra-judicial punishment and killing. See Amnesty International, Ethiopia Annual Report 2002 (Amnesty International <http://web.amnesty.org/report2003/eth-summary-eng, 2003 [cited.]), visited 24 March 2005.

43 This process has a parallel in the Nigerian federation, where new states within the federal member states are established from time to time, after claims from ethnic or regionally based groups. This is described as “State Creation” in Jinadu, “Ethnic Conflict and Federalism in Nigeria.”

thus many similarities with the processes during the colonial period in the rest of Africa, where legal categorisation of ethnic groups often led to creations or at least revivifications of dormant ethnic identities.

‘Ethnic entrepreneurship’ and the eruption of local conflicts have been particularly recurrent in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Regional State (SNNPRS), which includes more than 45 officially recognised ethnic groups. In this region, it has even been possible to observe processes of ‘ethno-genesis45 in the wake of the new political order. The Silte is one of the groups in SNNPRS that have been granted their own representative in the House of the Federation. They also obtained their own local administrative zone after successfully claiming a separate identity, singled out from the larger Gurage group that they have historically been considered part of. In the beginning of the 1990s, a group of young men in Addis Ababa, encouraged and supported by wealthy merchants in the capital, began to promote a distinct Silte ethnic identity on the basis of religious and linguistic markers.46 After several rounds of political campaigning, internal rivaling, a negative reply from the regional government, and finally a referendum in Gurage zone, the Silte managed to be accepted as an ethnic group with the regional and federal authorities.47 Several other Gurage groups, among them the Kebena and the Soddo Jidda, have also attempted to campaign for separate identities and self-administration, but without the same success as the Silte.48

Apart from the Silte-case in Gurage, regional and federal governments have demonstrated little willingness to follow the constitutional directives of holding referenda when groups demand self-determination. In many cases, they have instead preferred to use force to solve the issues.49 One example is the case of the Wolayta group in the Southern region. The Wolayta had an independent kingdom before the expansion of the Ethiopian state in the 19th century,50 but today their status is highly disputed. The Wolayta group has been a part of the larger North Omo administrative area since the Derg, which also included the Dawro-Konta, Gamo and Gofa ethnic groups. Community leaders in Wolayta, however, claim that the Wolayta is a group distinct from the other groups within North Omo, with a separate language and culture. Since

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46 The Silte are Muslims, and not Orthodox Christians, as the majority of the other Gurage groups are, and the Silte language has been taught in school in eastern Gurage since 1982 (Markakis, supra note 44).
the Constitution gives national groups the right to self-determination, they claim that they have a constitutional right to a separate zone structure. But the regional government argued that the Wolayta language and culture are not so easily distinguishable from those of the other groups, and therefore the Wolayta should not have any right to self-determination. In 1998, the regional government, in a rather unwise and provocative exercise, tried to replace the various indigenous tongues in the zone with an artificially constructed language common for all the North Omo groups, and attempted to introduce it as a standardised language of education and administration in the zone. This infuriated the Wolayta and led to violent resistance by students, teachers and civil servants. Many people were intimidated, imprisoned or killed by local police and federal security. Finally, the regional government gave in to the demands of the Wolayta, and withdrew the new language from administration and education. But the language issue triggered the fight and widened the support for an independent Wolayta zone. Finally, the Wolayta achieved their own zone status in November 2000, but this has again generated claims from other groups in the North-Omo zone for their own administration, which are still not settled. 51

Another outcome of the new ethnic political order is that fights over land which have been considered as a struggle between for example pastoralists and farmers in the past are now labelled as purely ‘ethnic’. In most cases the reason for the conflict is not ethnicity in itself. Issues have been ‘ethnicicised’ because ethnic discourse provides the appropriate and most gainful language at the moment. Incidents coming out of this are good illustrations of the argument that ethnicity is not a primordial trait, but a flexible social category that can be easily mobilised in political and economic struggles. In several instances, the new stress on ethnicity has aggravated relations between pastoral and agricultural groups, much due to the territorial demarcation along ethnic lines that has taken place after the introduction of ethnic federalism. This is taking place between the Borana and Somali groups in the Oromyia region, where the fights over grazing land have attached an ethnic language. 52 The border between the Somali and Oromyia regions in this area is ambiguously divided and has provoked violent clashes between the Borana and the Somali. At the end of 2004, several local communities (kebele) within the Borana and Somali areas took part in a highly contested referendum on the issue of which region they should belong to.

Since the mid 1990s, the EPRDF has somehow changed its rhetoric on the nationalities from the liberation of oppressed groups, as it was in 1991, to a stronger stress on administrative efficiency, and thereby co-ordination instead of self-administration for ethnic groups. This can be seen in the Wolayta case, where the concern for


administrative and educational co-ordination was set before the concern for the Wolayta’s right to self-determination. The federal government has also attempted to make some general administrative and institutional changes to contain ‘ethnic entrepreneurship’. Through the ‘woreda reform’ in 2002, the federal government aimed at reducing the budgetary ‘carrot’ of granting an independent ethnic zone. The reform led to the abolishment of the zone structure and the introduction of block grants directly from the regional government to the woreda. Another attempt to reduce the ethnic factor has been the central government’s effort to re-federate or re-centralise its power in urban areas with an ethnically mixed population. Eight multi-ethnic towns in the federation have been ‘de-ethnicised’ by giving them a chartered status exempt from the ethnic structures of the federal member states. But due to lack of popular consultation with the major ethnic groups who have a vested interest in staying in control in these towns, it has led to violent confrontation between federal forces and parts of the affected population. In SNNPRS, the attempt to make the regional capital Awassa a chartered city was met by demonstrations from the local Sidama group, who wanted to keep Awassa as the main town for the Sidama zone. Around fifty people were killed when federal forces intervened in 2002.

Examining the situation on the ground in Ethiopia, it is evident that the lack of disintegration of the federation is not a result of the government’s ability to ease ethnic tensions through the appeal to a common citizenship or through democratic processes. The containment of ethnic uprisings on the national level must rather be understood as an outcome of the centralised structures of the dominant party and its repression of opposition, preventing any group from launching effective campaigns for secession. Through the centralised party system, free opinion and political opposition are subjugated. Mobilisation of ethnic identities is encouraged, but only as long as it does not challenge the major party line. The surge of smaller ethnic conflicts must also be understood in this context. As long as ethnic tensions remain on the local level, it does not threaten the current regime. Local ethnic conflicts may therefore be allowed to emerge and develop. But in the long run, the lack of genuine self-determination for the larger ethnic groups of the country due to the intervention of the ruling party in regional affairs may lead to ethnic conflicts also on the national stage, as it was during the previous regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam and the Derg.

10. Conclusion

Ethiopia today lacks two basic pre-conditions for mitigating ethnic conflicts in federal states: a democratic system of governance and an inclusive and sustainable pan-national identity. These fundamental deficiencies indicate that the current peace and relative stability in this country at the Horn of Africa is fragile, and may not be

long-lasting. Although the introduction of ethnically based federalism in Ethiopia has given ethnic groups in the country unprecedented constitutional rights to self-government and cultural expression, the current political system and its stress on ethnic labels is constraining rather than enlarging the political space for an overall citizenship in Ethiopia. As we have seen, the Constitution restricts the opportunities for Ethiopian citizens to register with mixed or pan-Ethiopian identity, and political practice shows that the most efficient way to be recognised and represented in local, regional and national government is through ethnic groups and ethnically based parties. In the political order of ethnic federalism it pays off to sharpen ethnic divides, and ‘indigeneship’ is thus becoming the favoured way of identification and organisation, at the expense of a common citizenship. The fact that the government is perceived as controlled by one ethnic minority, the Tigrayans of the TPLF, makes it difficult to see the state as neutral, treating all citizens equally. This too undermines the ideas of an overall Ethiopian citizenship and a pan-Ethiopian identity.

Article 39 of the Ethiopian Constitution and its primordial definition of ethnic identities may in itself stimulate ethnic entrepreneurship, make previously flexible ethnic categories fixed and rigid and create ethnic tensions. Indications of this are the surge of local ethnic conflicts and examples of ‘ethno-genesis’ in Ethiopia over the past fourteen years. It is nevertheless the lack of democratic rights and genuine self-government that make up the largest challenges in Ethiopia today. Through the EPRDF’s centralised party organisation, regional and local governments cannot run their own affairs without intervention from central party officials, and hence, the federal division of power is diluted. The centralised party rule has temporarily blocked the larger ethnic uprisings that were prevalent during the previous regimes. But it remains to be seen how long this enforced and superficial stability will last. The events during the 2005 elections indicate that the EPRDF regime is weakened and not able to gain legitimacy for its imposition of control and suppression anymore. The urban vote for the Coalition for Unity and Democracy, a party which has a clear stand against ‘ethnic politics’, and the signs of anti-Tigrayan sentiments in the 2005 elections demonstrate that the EPRDF’s and TPLF’s rule is fragile, and will not survive unless through the continued use of force. The use of force is nonetheless a short-sighted solution to the EPRDF’s problems. In the end, Meles Zenawi’s regime may end up as a victim of its own authoritarianism, and its noble intentions of pacifying ethnic wars may not be as attainable and endurable as the party apparently anticipated.