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Ethnic federal system and conflict in the post-1995 Ethiopia: The case of southern regional state

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The study investigated the practice of ethnic federal system along with ethnic rights to self-determination and associated conflicts in the context of Southern Regional state of Ethiopia. This study is a qualitative research that employed both primary and secondary sources. The federal system is based on the constitutional conviction that ethnic groups in Ethiopia have the right to self-determination up to secession. By using ethnicity as an instrument to establish the constituent units, ethnic entitlement and political representations, the federal system has uniquely formalized politics of ethnicity in Ethiopia. Practically, the federal system in Ethiopia faces anomalous asymmetries both within the four ethno-parties that formed the Ruling party and constituent units. Despite rhetorically committing to multi–party politics and democracy, the political regime in power is markedly intolerant of political pluralism. The 'making and remaking' of the regions and local ethnic political parties in Southern Ethiopia has led to conglomeration of 56 ethnic groups into a single region. Instead of ethnic right to self-determination in accordance with the constitutional principles, the ruling party has gradually put efforts into administrative integration of diverse ethnic groups. This is one of the underlying causes for ethnic autonomy conflicts in the region. It is time for the ruling party to accept the consequences of the constitutional choices, to protect the constitutionally declared principle of federalism, to respect ethnic right to self–governance in Ethiopia beyond ideological and political motives.

Key words: Ethnic federal system, the right to self-determination, making and remaking, ethnic autonomy conflicts, southern regional state and party politics.

INTRODUCTION

The second half of the 19th century was dominated by the 'making and remaking' of modern Ethiopia that coincided with the European colonization of Africa. Unlike the African states established by external European colonial conquest, the formation of modern Ethiopian state was the result of internally driven wars of incorporation and state formation. Despite this stark difference of its historical development from those of other African states, Ethiopia faces similar problems of state-building in the same fashion with other post–colonial African states (Mengisteab, 2007).

This process of internally carving the modern state by

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excessive forces were not impacted differentially from the external colonial conquest in the rest of Africa. Unlike other African states, ethnic diversity in Ethiopia is a result of state formation. The consequence of territorial conquest was far more brutal and devastating for the conquered peoples from the south, east and west. The incorporation of conquered peoples into the emerging empire was a dual oppression, both national and class. The conquest created the North–South dichotomy: one polity but two markedly different north–south systems (Merera, 2003).

The second half of the 20th century has been shaped by struggles started by the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM), and subsequent ethno-nationalist forces intended to end the hegemonic project of building 'a nation–state' that emerged after the formation of the modern state (Temesgen, 2016). These class and national struggles had brought the *National Questions* as politico-ideological agenda. The *National Question* used by active Ethiopian political forces to describe the deep-rooted ethnic marginalization and inequality in the country. In other words, while the wars of the 19th century were for the 'making' of modern Ethiopian state, the struggles of second half of the 20th century were for the reversal of the same historical process that created the multi-ethnic polity of Ethiopia (Merera, 2007). The class and national struggles precipitated the revolution of 1974 that demised the 44 years long reign of Emperor Haileselassie I. In the absence of organized political parties, however, the military took the advantage of the political vacuum and controlled the state power.

Descended from the Student Movement, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and its satellite groups, assumed the state power as the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) after waging a successful armed struggle against a socialist military regime in 1991 (Temesgen, 2016). As a legitimate response to the *National Questions,* the TPLF/ EPRDF adopted a federal system and formalized ethnic rights to self-determination up to secession. By transforming itself into multi-ethnic EPRDF, the TPLF enlarged its programme and ideology nationwide with the ambition of creating a renewed, 'revolutionary–democratic centralist federalism' instead of an enforced unitary state (Hagmann and Abbink, 2011; Aalen, 2006). By adopting an ethnic-based federal system along with ethnic right to self-determination up to secession, Ethiopia has gone further than any other African states and further than almost any state worldwide. The 'revolutionary democracy' was instituted by the EPRDF as politically guiding state ideology.

The ethno-federal system is explicitly based on ethnicity as a fundamental principle of state organization, representation and political mobilization. Nine ethnically designated regional states were established. These included the regional state of: Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somali, Hareri, Gambella, Benishangul–Gumuz

and Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regional States (SNNPRS) or the Southern Regional State, which is the subject of this study. Theoretically, the regional states are given a broader symmetrical political autonomy to exercise a degree of legislative, executive and judicial powers. Notwithstanding constitutionally entrenched equal rights and power, the interesting point about the Ethiopian regional states is practical asymmetry in ethnic composition, territorial and population size. In many major aspects, the SNNPRS or Southern Regional State is quite unique in the ethno-federation of Ethiopia.

Most relevant studies on the Ethiopian federal system are those that focus on "ethno-federal aspect" as either a solution or problems; the extent to which ethnicity in politics has worked out and how far it is a solution to the problem of multi-ethnic state. In this regard, one can refer to studies that focus on the experimentation of accommodating diversity under ethnic federal system in Ethiopia (Assefa, 2007). Among the other useful studies, one can also refer to comparative studies emphasizing the implementation of ethnic federal system and ethnic rights to self-determination and point out the clear paradoxes in the promise and practice of federal system in Ethiopia that produce ethnic conflicts (Aalen, 2008; Berhanu, 2007). Another studies focus more on why ethnic federal system was adopted in Ethiopia and its practice taking comparative case studies, concluding that federal system has neither realized its own raison d'état nor emerged as a credible instrument of pacifying ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia (Asnake, 2013). Still some others focus more on politicization of ethnicity and formalizing secession, concluding that the future of federalism in Ethiopia is unclear (Alem, 2005; Abbink, 2011; Clapham, 2009).

Indeed, all these studies are vital in understanding ethno –federal system and ethnic politics in the post 1991 Ethiopia. However, these and other studies investigated the relationship between ethnic federal system and conflicts in the context of Southern Regional State of federal Ethiopia. Thus, albeit briefly, either the studies lack empirical detail and do not show the practice of ethnic federal system along with constitutionally sacred ethnic rights to self-determination and associated challenges that would ignite ethnic conflicts in the context of Southern Regional State.

This study is intended to explore the relationship between ethnic federalism, along with the right to self-determination and ethnic based conflicts in the context of the SNNPRS. Accordingly, the study has the following three objectives. Firstly, the study examines 'making and remaking' of the Southern Regional State since 1991. Secondly, the study investigates the emerging trends of asymmetries and associated paradoxes in the ethnic federal system in terms of ethnic diversity, the EPRDF party politics and inconsistency in granting the right to ethnic self–governance taking SNNPRS as a prototype model. Thirdly, the study analyzes ethnic conflict

dynamics and trends in the context of SNNPRS.

Methodologically, this study was an empirical analysis of the real practice of ethnic federalism, ethnic rights to self-governance and party politics since 1991 in the context of SNNPRS or Southern Regional State. The study used multiple methods of data collection: qualitative face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions, document analysis and review of secondary sources. The researcher made several field trips to cities and towns for data collection. He held interviews with key informants, as well as conducted focus group discussions in capital city of Addis Ababa, Regional capital city of Hawassa and Zonal cities of Arba Minch, Hossana, Wolaita-Sodo, Wolkite, Sawola and in some selected woredas from 5 April, 2015 to 15 January, 2016.

Theoretical aspects: Federalism and ethnicity

This article is mainly about federalism, ethnicity and associated ethnic based conflicts. The relationship between these notions and the effect of their combination needs to be put in proper perspective. Hence, the concept of federalism and ethnicity will be discussed on a theoretical plane.

Concept of federalism

Like most social science concepts, the concept of federalism can mean different thing to different people. This is because; there is no universally accepted definition of federalism (Kymlicka, 2005). In an attempt to define federalism, scholars' emphasized the division of power within the framework of common government. In its most general sense, federalism is an arrangement in which two or more self–governing communities share the same political space (Karmis and Norman, 2005).

To Kymlicka (2005), federalism refers to a political system which includes a constitutionally entrenched division of powers between a central government and two or more sub-units defined on territorial basis, such that each level of government has sovereign authority over certain issues. In contrast to Kymlicka (2005) definitions that focus on territorial division of power, Daniel Elazar relates federalism with the prevalence of a covenant of partnership between the general government and its sub–units. In this respect, Elazar (1987) pointed out that federal principles are concerned with the combination of shared rule and self–rule. The federal system is, therefore, adopted on the basis of combined 'self–rule' and 'shared rule' so as to create a union of units while maintaining specific integrity.

In the context of this study, federalism has to do with the need of people and polities to unite for common purposes yet remain separate to preserve their integrity. It is rather like wanting to have one's cake and eat it too

(Elazar, 1987). Overall, federalism is considered as a compromise between unity and diversity, autonomy and sovereignty, national and regional issues.

Federal bargain, national, multi–national and ethnic federalism

There is no universal set of factors that explain why countries become federal (Davis, 1978). Every federation is a result of unique historical and political circumstances. Each model of federalism originates from historical–geographical experiences of the respective societies and hence, it is impossible to impose any of the 'models' of federalism across the board to a wide range of other settings (Agnew, 1995; Kymlicka, 2006). Some of the factors that led to the origin of federalism are often considered from different perspectives. Generally, federalism originates in two ways: through aggregation of independent states or through the devolution of power to sub–national units that lead to the federalization of a once unitary political system.

The manner in which the federal system has been created is equally important. Depending on how they came to be, Stepan (2005) often classifies federations into three categories. Firstly, the coming together federation formed through aggregation or integration of pre–existing states. The US, Australia and Switzerland are prototype models. Secondly, the holding–together federation formed through devolution of a previously centralized system of power in a unitary country. Examples are India, Spain and Belgium. Thirdly, putting together federation formed through 'a heavily coercive effort by a non–democratic centralizing power to put together a multi–national state, some of the component of which had previously been independent states (2005). The USSR was an example of this type. Stepan (2005) key contribution to the previous broader division of federation as federal integration and federal structuring is therefore the attempt to explain discrepancy that exists among federations established through devolution.

Fitting the Ethiopia's federalism into one of Stepan (2005) continuum of federations has been controversial. For scholars, like Assefa (2012) and Tsegay (2010), the Ethiopian federal model belongs to Stepan (2005) model of 'holding' together federation. Contrarily, Andreas (2003) and Asnake (2013) fit consecutively the Ethiopian federalism into Stepan (2005) model of 'coming' and 'putting' together federalism. As the political system in Ethiopia had very strong unitary past, the federal system adopted as the only way to hold the country or ethno–nationalist groups together in the state. Accordingly, the constituent units with constitutionally entrenched autonomy rights in Ethiopia are new creations of the federal bargain, rather than entities with a prior existence. Therefore, this study categorizes the Ethiopian model into the Stepan (2005) continuum of 'holding' together

federalism. Increasing interests in the use of federalism led to the question of which type of federalism is relevant to manage ethnic diversity and conflicts. Kymlicka (2005) divides federalism into two: Territorial and multi–national (2005).

Territorial federalism is the oldest form of federalism in the world. The older western federation of US, Australia and Germany fall under this category. It mainly arose for reasons unrelated to the ethno–cultural diversity and accommodating national minorities. They were originated from the coming together of their units, which previously existed independently. If national federalism was not intended to accommodate ethno–cultural diversity, why would state adopt federalism? According to Kymlicka (2005), federalism was just one way of several mechanisms for reducing the chance of tyranny. The adoption of federalism, for instance in the USA, is to ensure separation of powers within each level of government, to put limit on the power of central government and to minimize threat to individual rights. Kymlicka (2005) emphasizes that any liberal democracy which contains a large and diverse territory will surely be pushed in the direction of adopting some form of federalism, regardless of its ethno–cultural composition.

Furthermore, the virtues of territorial federalism for large–scale democracies are manifested, not only in the US but also in Australia, Brazil and Germany (ibid: 276). In other works, Kymlicka (2005) has pointed out that the goal of eliminating minority national identities has been abandoned (in the western territorial or national federations), and it is now accepted that these groups will continue to see themselves as separate and self–governing nations within the larger state into the indefinite future (2006).

Currently, all national federations are now multinational in nature. In short, we see a virtually universal trend towards multinational federalism in the world (ibid: 35). In contrast to territorial or national federalism, multinational federalism is mainly adopted for reasons related to ethno–cultural diversity. To provide guarantee and accommodate the desire of national minorities, federal sub–units were deliberately manipulated to ensure that the minorities could achieve self–rule (ibid). Accordingly, internal boundaries have been drawn and powers distributed in such a way as to ensure that each national group is able to maintain itself as a distinct and self-governing society and culture. The multi–national federation is thus not only recognizes ethnic diversity but also reflects them in their ideology and structures. In multinational federalism, there are significant limitations on how powers can be divided and on how boundaries can be drawn (ibid: 277). Therefore, whether the allocation of powers to territorial sub–units promotes the interests of and accommodates minorities depends on consciously addressing these limitations. Both multinational and ethnic federations therefore focus on accommodating ethnic groups in a country. However,

ethnic federation devolves powers along ethnic lines and enables ethnic groups to participate equally at the federal level, as the case in Belgium.

As this study focuses on the Ethiopian ethnic federalism, one may then ask why ethnic as opposed to multinational federalism is more appropriate in the Ethiopian context. It is also appropriate to ask in what way, if any; the Ethiopian ethnic federalism differs from multi–national federations of the west. It is conceivable to view this question from the ideological rigour of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. Kymlicka (2006) summarizes the differences between Ethiopian ethno-federation and western multi-national federalism as follow:

There are some important differences at the level of [Ethiopian] constitutional principles. The most striking of these are the explicitness with which the Ethiopian constitution affirms the principle of ethno-national self-governance and the logical consistency with which it attempts to institutionalize that principle–that is it accords all national groups the right to self–determination and envisages procedures for redrawing internal boundaries accordingly.

It has been mentioned that one of the characteristics of federalism is its aspiration and purpose to generate and maintain both unity and diversity simultaneously (Elazar, 1987). Concerning the origin and bargain of the Ethiopian federalism, Kymlicka (2006) points out that in contrast to western multinational federalism, the Ethiopian federal constitution emerged out of revolution, not peaceful and piecemeal democratic mobilization.

In Ethiopia, unlike Western multinational federations, for instance Spain, that mediated questions of ethnic autonomy through a protracted bargaining between the State and mobilized minority groups, federalism entailed a top down reconstitution of the country based on ethnicity (ibid:56). After adopting ethnic federal system, many ethnic groups, which did not mobilize before 1991 based on ethnic nationalism, were required to organize themselves according to their ethnicity so that they fit into the new ethno–federal system in Ethiopia. Accordingly, ethnic federalism led to the overall ethnification of politics in the country as the state promoted ethnicity as the key instrument of political mobilization and state organization. Thus, ethnic federal restructuring in Ethiopia shows some of the characters of what Fleiner (2001) called ethnified polities:

Territorial boundaries are drawn in a way that maximizes ethnic homogeneity. Policies are pursued which differentiate the status rights of citizens according to ethnic affiliation. Policies are proposed, advocated and resisted, and associations as well as political parties are formed, in the name of fostering the well-being of an ethnic community at the expense of excluding those internal and external groups who are considered not

belonging to it (cited in Asnake, 2009:29).

It is therefore on the basis of the mode of state formation, ethnic based mobilization, entitlement and modality of representation in the governments that the Ethiopian federalism is named as 'ethnic' than western multi–national federations.

At the end of the Cold-War, one of the continent's brutal dictator, socialist president Mengistu was removed from power in 1991 after a successful military victory by the TPLF led the EPRDF. In 1995, the EPRDF adopted a new constitution that brought a fundamental transfor-mation in the political philosophy as antithesis to ethnic assimilation policy and marginalization by old regimes. The EPRDF adopted ethnic federal model, along with the right to self-determination, as a panacea to ethnic inequality and the challenges of ethno-national armed conflicts that beleaguered the old Ethiopian state (Tsegay, 2010; Assefa, 2012). The ethnic –based federal system helped to prevent the relapse of and removed the ethnic based armed struggle from the national scene in the post 1990s. Nonetheless, the federal system has created its own types of conflicts, which will be investigated in the context of SNNPRS.

Ethnicity: The concept and theoretical debates

The dynamic nature of the concept along with its complex manifestations makes it difficult to define ethnicity. For Brass (1991), ethnicity is a sense of ethnic identity that can be used to create internal cohesion, and also differentiate themselves from other groups. For Hutchison and Smith (1996), the meaning of the ethnicity is uncertain. It can mean 'the essence of an ethnic group' or 'the quality of belonging to an ethnic community or group'. According to Eriksen (1993), ethnicity has to do with the 'classification of peoples and group relationship'. He has further noted that ethnicity is the relationship between groups whose members consider themselves distinctive, and these groups may be ranked hierarchically within a society (ibid: 30). As a marker of groups' distinctiveness, sense of self–identification and ascription of others, ethnicity determines the nature of inter–group interaction. In defining an ethnic group, scholars emphasize those factors that differentiate a given group from others, and also to strengthen its internal cohesion.

The scholarly debate on ethnicity has often been reflective of the theories behind ethnicity. Based on the questions whether ethnicity is a permanent feature or subject to change and flexible, scholars have developed contending theories/ approaches to ethnicity. From the Primordialism perspective, ethnic groups share kinship, common psychological make-up, tradition, history, religion, culture, social organization or language, and common territorial unity. These traits of ethnic identity are considered to be objectively given, coherent, easily distinguishable, stable and genetically determined and the reasons for the common action of the group (Geertz, 1973; Eller and Coughlan, 1996). Thus, the primordial traits bound together group members as a distinct and used as a marker for group's self–identification and ascription by others.

As noted by Eller and Coughlan (1993), primordialism as such has come in for a good deal of criticism for presenting a static and naturalistic view of ethnicity, and for lacking explanatory power (Hutchison and Smith, 1996). Accordingly, in confutation of the Primordialism, instrumentalism and constructivism emerged. These theories acknowledge the existence of primordial traits but they emphasis that ethnicity is not a given but dynamic and flexible phenomena created by human thought and action. They further argue that ethnic identities are subjective, relational and situational. Based on these shared understanding, the study will emphasis their distinctive assumptions regarding the nature of ethnicity.

Instrumentalists' has emphasized the utility of ethnicity as a tool of politics. They treat ethnicity as a social, political and cultural resource for different interests–and status–groups (ibid). One of the central ideas of ethnicity is socially constructed nature of ethnicity and elite driven competition for resources and ability of individual to 'cut and mix' from a variety of ethnic heritage and cultures to forge their own individual or group identities (Hutchison and Smith 1996; Brass, 1991). However, instrumentalists can be criticized for defining interests largely in material terms, for failing to recognize that ethnic identity cannot be decided by individuals at will but is embedded within and controlled by the larger society or for its apparent failure to take seriously the participants' sense of permanency of their *ethnies* (Lake and Rothchild, 1998:5; Hutchison and Smith, 1996).

Constructivism theory presents an alternative for the polarized views on the nature of ethnicity. It integrates both the instrumental use and the cultural meaning of ethnic identities. Arguably, incorporation of constructivism would help to improve the potential for empirically sensitive analysis of ethnic political mobilization and managing diversity and conflicts. Unlike instrumentalist perspective, it assumes that ethnicity is not only a matter of strategy, but rather constructed and negotiated in everyday life on the basis of selective interpretation of real cultural experiences of history and tradition in order to mobilize for political action (Young, 1996; Banks, 1996). It further assumes that ethnic identity is not something people possess but it is something people construct in specific social and historical contexts to further their own interests.

There is a consensus today that none of the existing theories can exclusively account for ethnicity. There is a need among scholars to transcend these divergently contending views by attempting to synthesis their views

in their effort to define ethnicity. Scholars have sought to situate themselves somewhere on the spectrum between 'the primordialist' and 'the circumstantialists' (Glazer and Moynihan, 1975). In this regard, Hutchison and Smith (1996) further noted that neither types of approaches (primordialism and instrumentalism) has much place for the vicissitude of ethnic community and identity over the *longue durée*. There is a consensus that ethnicity has thus interrelated objective as well as subjective dimensions. Accordingly, this study contends that ethnicity possess attribute both from 'primordialist' and 'constructivist' perspectives on the nature of ethnicity. This study, following Banks (1996), suggests that ethnicity is a group's self–identification and/or ascription by others to belong to a certain ethnic group on the basis of common primordial traits while it is also a construction or as an instrument of groups' mobilization for political or other purposes.

The Ethiopian ethnic federal system is explicitly based on ethnicity as nations', nationalities and peoples. Thus, the central place given to ethnicity in terms of state organization, representation, entitlement, and mobilization has in a remarkable fashion brought the question of ethnicity to the realm of the politico–legal in Ethiopia. In its stipulation of the principle of popular sovereignty, the FDRE constitution arrogates state sovereignty and the right to self–determination up to secession, to the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia. This constitutional stipulations mark an emphatic indication of formalizing and institutionalizing ethnicity in the post 1990s Ethiopia. Therefore, with the introduction of ethnic federalism, the politics of ethnicity has been formally institutionalized since 1991.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 'making and remaking' of the southern regional state

The Southern Ethiopia is an area which had long been totally marginalized. Accordingly, the development of ethnic consciousness was too late and slow in the Southern Ethiopia. Previously, the study region was never a unified area in economic, cultural or political terms before 1991. In the past, ethnic groups in the South were divided into different provinces and they were never under one administration (Abbink, 1998). Despite claims for complete departure by the EPRDF regime, continuities with the past remain clearly visible in Ethiopia. Rhetorically, the EPRDF abandoned Marxist–Leninism as a political guiding ideology as its predecessor. However, the ideology of the current regime in Ethiopia entails a set of governance and power techniques marked by vanguard party rule derived from the same Marxist–Leninist ideology and a commitment to the neo–Stalinist rights of nationalities to self–determination up to secession

(Hagmann and Abbink, 2011).

Paradoxically, the continuity of centralized and authoritarian policies and practices under dominant party system, and the persistence of old problems have remained visible in Ethiopia. The EPRDF has continued, as Donham (2002) notes, one of the *Derge's* main projects for the Ethiopian state is capturing the citizen or *encadrement*, incorporating every member of the community into its own structures of control (Aalen, 2008). The introduction of ethnic based federal system, the multi–party politics, formalizing ethnicity as the political idiom of public life, holding periodic elections, ethnic based administrative boundary redrawing and rhetorically liberalizing the economy can be taken as changes since 1991. Although ethnic right to self–determination up to secession is formalized as a response to the *National Question*, its implementation has mixed results as reported by informants. The main criticism *inter alia* is that the federal system has been preoccupied in addressing the rights of ethno-nationalist group. As a result, it has not responded well to the political interests of smaller ethnic groups in the country.

The 'making and remaking' of SNNPRS were undertaken in two phases. The first was during the EPRDF's transitional period while the second was after adopted ethno-federalization following the coming into force of the constitution of 1995. Accordingly, the ethnic groups of today's South were witnessed in two phases of transitions. The first 'making and remaking' of the Southern Region was during the EPRDF's interim period (1991 to 1995). The transitional charter was promulgated shortly after the fall of the military regime in 1991. The charter created an interim EPRDF led government. It also formalized Eritrea's secession, and granted for the first time the ethnic right to self–determination up to secession in Ethiopia. In pre-1990s, any form of decentralization was seen as a threat to the delicately constructed national unity. Thus, the federal system and the right to self–determination are not an all too familiar terms in the Ethiopian legal system. In a long recorded history of Ethiopia, the interim charter was the first step to turn the wheel of history from strong unitary state to decentralizations along ethno–linguistic line. Although the transitional charter was the first to bring the concept of ethnic self-determination, the federal system had to wait until 1995 for it to appear in Ethiopia's constitutional rhetoric. The interim charter and the subsequent proclamations established a system which could be seen as merely the foretaste of the 'ethnic-federalism' to emerge in Ethiopia.

The first historic attempt to decentralization got its elaborate expression only when proclamation No.*7/1992* was issued to establish *National/Regional* self–governments in Ethiopia. This Proclamation made the ethnic–based decentralization more articulate and real in Ethiopia. Accordingly, the internal administration was restructured and fourteen regional states were created

mainly along ethnic lines. These were: Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somalia, Benishangul, Gurage/Hadiya, Sidama, Wolaita, Omo, Kafa, Gambela, Harar and Addis Ababa (TGE, 1992). These self–governing regions were mainly ethnic in their making although almost none were entirely homogenous. However, there was no formal use of the term ethnicity. Based on this proclamation, an incipient form of self–government was made apparent in the country. While autonomy is granted to 'self–governments', they were subordinate to the central government in all their dealings.

For previously marginalized Southern peoples, this decentralization was described as a honeymoon (Watson, 2002). By the EPRDF's rhetoric of liberating nationalities from the previous oppressive regimes, the claims of all ethnically defined groups for internal self–determination had been encouraged during the interim period in the South (Vaughan, 2003; Aalen, 2008). The ethnic groups were made to organize and mobilize for self–determination. This EPRDF's 'ethnic free–for all' policy was evidenced by organizing five out of 14 national regional units during early years in the areas comprising today's SNNPRS. The major ethnic groups of the region, like Sidama, were able to gain regional status, and smaller ethnic groups managed to gain separate self–governance at sub–regional levels. They were established more or less using similar patterns of administrative restructuring of socialist military regime.

After consolidating control of the state, there was an observable and orchestrated move in the South by the EPRDF in the mid–1990s to claw back control over its' ethnic free for–all' policy (Vaughan, 2003). Integrationist impetus and power centralization vis-à-vis the formal federal system is characterizing the government policy. The greatest challenge in the Ethiopian politics is the EPRDF's reticence to live up to its promises and principles (Hagmann and Abbink, 2011; Aalen, 2006). The EPRDF rhetoric of 'ethnic free–for all' policy was waned when these five regional units of transitional period were unilaterally conflated into one as the SNNPRS. Seen in retrospect, the EPRDF had good start during the transitional period compared to the outcomes of reconstructing the Ethiopian state and society under ethnic federal system. In this regard, Lewis (1994) notes that from an initial position of great moral and political strength, the EPRDF has fallen back into the old Ethiopian tradition of attempting to rule single–handedly and autocratically, without consent of, or input from, the governed'(Vaughan, 2003).

The interim period was formally ended after coming into force of the 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution. The FDRE Constitution formalized a federal state. Nine regional states were recognized as constituting Ethiopia thereby reducing the number of previous fourteen regional states by five. This was mainly due to top-down EPRDF decision to merge former five regional states into one as the SNNPRS or Southern Regional State. As stressed by respondents, this consolidation of five regions as the SNNPRS was made for political fiat without any historical, geographic, linguistic and other justifications. Informants further emphasized that the merger was imposed on them by the ruling party in the center. It was not only regional states but also more than 21 political parties proliferated in the former five regions, which were 'consolidated' into one regional ruling party, first as the Southern Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Front (SEPDF) and later as, Southern Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Movement (SEPDM). As stressed by some informants, the political motivation behind this political engineering is related to the TPLF's desire to create a bigger region and dominant local vanguard regional ruling party as a core member of the EPRDF. Politically, the SNNPRS and SEPDM help the EPRDF to maintain inter–regional balance to larger Oromia and Amhara regions. In this regard, Merera (2004:257) notes that 'such lumping together of Southern Ethiopian Peoples' seems to be motivated both to create a counter–weight to the most populous and vast Oromia region that can cast its shadow across the country and administrative convenience for central control'.

Respondents stressed that the 'making and remaking' of regions stand in stark contrast with the core principles of the 1995 Constitution that further consolidated all principles of the charter, except formalizing a federal system. They further noted that this 'remaking' of the region and its peoples has been depriving southern ethnic groups from exercising constitutionally granted rights to self-governance. It is related to the EPRDF's desire to sustain its control of state power and in sharp contradiction to the national Constitution that gives ethnically defined groups a universal right to self–rule.

The emerging asymmetries in the Ethiopian ethnic federal system

The SNNPRS is unique within the Ethiopian federal system. It was the only Regional State established at the end of the transitional period and stands as ethnically, the most diverse region in Ethiopia. In many respects, the SNNPRS can be taken as a prototype model to show practical asymmetry in the Ethiopian federal system. Theoretically, the Ethiopian federal system is symmetrical. There are several asymmetrical features, both vertical and horizontal, in the Ethiopian federal system. Some of these asymmetrical features are discussed below:

Firstly, despite the existence of more than 80 ethnic groups in the country and constitutional promise of the ethnic right to self–determination, the federal system has overemphasized on the rights of ethno–nationalist groups. At the practical level, however, only five major ethnic groups as core nationalities – Tigray, Afar, Amhara,

Oromo and Somali–were granted separate regions named after the ethnic groups. Practically, the federal system does not provide the types of self– governance structure for all ethnic groups. The right to self–administration is granted inconsistently and in an asymmetrical manner. Many smaller ethnic groups were not considered within the federal system. They were lumped together in the multi–ethnic regions: the SNNPRS, Gambella and Benishangul–Gumuz regions. The case of SNNPRS is quite unique as it is the home for 56 ethnic groups in the country. As stressed by informants, this was the outcome of 'making and remaking' of the region and local ethno-political parties for largely political expediency. Some smaller groups' were also subsumed within ethnically designated regions. The Ethiopian federal system is a system for ethno-nationalist groups. It has no adequate political space for the smaller groups as reported by informants. Almost all of those multi–ethnic regions have been facing ethnic based conflicts.

Secondly, while using ethnicity as the key instrument in operationalzing the federal system, there emerged a number of anomalies within the federal system. As noted in the latest national census, there are only 10 major ethnic groups with a total population of one million and above (CSA, 2008). These are: the Oromo, the Amhara, the Somali, the Tigray, Sidama, the Gurage, Wolayita, Hadiya, Afar and the Gamo ethnic groups. Of these, five of them, namely Sidama, Gurage, Welayita, Hadiya and Gamo are from the SNNPRS. Some of them, like Sidama, had accorded a separate statehood like the other groups before the merging of former five regions. In the same census, the Harari have a total of 31,869 populations. Surprisingly, when the EPRDF allowed regional status during the transition period, the Harari had a total population of only 9,374 out of a total regional population of 131,139 that indicates an undoubted constitutional oddity (Vaughan, 2003). While minority Hareri continue to enjoy regional status, these five major ethnic groups of the south were not allowed to have their own separate regions as reported by respondents. Instead, as mentioned by informants, they were denied the same right and amorphously conglomerated with other smaller groups as SNNPRS. Indeed, as Merera (2004) notes, 'the Hareri regional status has exposed some of the absurdities of the EPRDF's regionalization policy'. In this regard, Mesfin also notes that 'if the population of the Harari warrants the status of a regional state, then all language groups that have the same or higher population size must have a regional state'(1999). This anomaly has its own contribution for instability and conflicts in the multi–ethnic regions.

Thirdly, the regional states exhibit huge disparities in terms of population, territorial and ethnic composition size due to making of ethnic identity and administrative boundaries congruent. In terms of total population and territorial size, the regional state of the Oromia, Amhara and the SNNPRS are too big with the resultant administrative and logistic difficulties in Ethiopia. In contrast, the Harari city state region without Zonal administrative structure is extremely too small with the difficulty of ensuring its economic viability. The level of ethnic heterogeneity differs from one state to the other. With 56 ethnic groups, the SNNPR stands as the most ethnically diverse regional state in Ethiopia. Such an asymmetry could have the potential to destabilize the federations due to ethnic nationalism and ethnic internal secessionist tendency that is prevalent today in the multi–ethnic regions.

Theoretically, disparity in terms of territory, population and resources between constituent units can lead to relationships between the centre and periphery that can potentially damage the federation itself (Watts, 1991). For instance, the Dutch–speaking region and its economic strength compared to the French–speaking region have created stress in the Belgian ethno–federation (Kymlicka, 2006). The huge asymmetries in the regional state in Ethiopia might lead to destabilization of the federal system and the asymmetrical contribution of the constituent units and ethnic groups to the stability of the federation.

Fourth, the federal system in Ethiopia also faces an anomalous asymmetry regarding political power; inter–federal relations, both vertical and horizontal, and center–periphery disparity. Because of its military victory over *Derge* regime, the TPLF from smaller Tigray in terms of geographic size and population has dominated the political process in Ethiopia by the name of the EPRDF (Asnake, 2013; Hagmann and Abbink, 2011). Through its governing practices, the TPLF/EPRDF has not done enough to make the Ethiopian state appear ethnically neutral. According to Aalen (2006), 'the main danger in this respect comes from inability to elevate the federal government both in popular perceptions and practice above ethnic partisanship'.However, this could have negative repercussions on federal stability and development. The other aspects of asymmetries are the dependence of the regions on federal subsidies for much of their finances and the *de jure* asymmetry in inter–governmental relations.

As a post-Marxist-Leninist vanguard party system, the EPRDF's practice of the party politics is the most obvious limitation to federal system. This centralized federal system in practice contradicts with constitutional powers generously granted to the regional states. In the historic past, peripheral areas were completely marginalized in Ethiopia. Relatively, the center is well off in terms of social and physical infrastructure as compared to the peripheral areas of Ethiopian Somali, Afar, Benishangul–Gumuz and Gambella. Almost all of these peripheral areas remain insecure, and they have experienced several violent conflicts. The center–periphery dichotomy is also another challenge that prevails even within the regional states.

The EPRDF power politics in Ethiopia

The 'making and remaking' of the SNNPRS is an evidence for an instrumental use of ethnicity for political expediency. With its multitude of ethnic diversity, the SNNPRS was considered to be an interesting ground for ethnic engineering. The unilateral merger of former five regions into one as the SNNPRS can be taken as the first step in the party politics and instrumentalist transformation of power of ethnicity. The second one was amalgamation of the many of ethnic based People Democratic Organizations (PDOs). More than 21 PDOs, which were initially fabricated by the TPLF/EPRDF as a strategy to secure a political support base, were merged together as regional ruling party. Once after power is consolidated, the EPRDF decided to 'remake' regions and the PDOs as reported by respondents.

The TPLF has controlled the state power by transforming itself into a multi–national liberation front by establishing the EPRDF in the 1990s. The EPRDF is a coalition of four ethnic organizations: the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Southern Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Front (SEPDF). As part of establishing the EPRDF, the TPLF forged separate organizations for the Amhara, Oromo and after 1991, for SNNPRS from various ethnic groups. In reality, the creation of the EPRDF has helped the TPLF to play a role beyond the bounds of Tigray province (Markakis, 1994).

The ANDM was the first to be established with an encouragement and support of the TPLF in 1980. It was the first to form a 'coalition' with the TPLF to establish the EPRDF in 1989 (Clapham, 2002). The TPLF established OPDO from ex–prisoners of war and deserted soldiers of the *Derge* regime in 1990. The OPDO was created as a counteract and to undermine the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) that has been fighting for independent Oromia since 1975 and not willing to accept a subordinate role to the TPLF. Perhaps, the last regional organization to be formed by the TPLF was the Southern Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Front (SEPDF) as ruling party of the SNNPRS. After internal political cracking within the TPLF in the early 1990s, as noted by informants, the SEPDF has modified into the Southern Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Movement (SEPDM).

Indeed, the federal system in Ethiopia faces an anomalous horizontal asymmetry within the parties formed by the EPRDF. Intra–party relationships within the EPRDF remain horizontally asymmetrical. The TPLF remains the primary mover and shaker within the 'vanguard' party and its central leadership uses authoritarian Marxist–Leninist principles of 'democratic centralization' and self–criticism (*gimgama*, in Amharic) to stifle internal dissent (Hagmann and Abbink, 2011:579; Aalen, 2006:245). The TPLF continues to dominate the state power by the name of the EPRDF. However, it has

been emphasized that this asymmetry has its adverse impacts for the realization of genuine federalism and could have negative repercussions on federal stability in Ethiopia. Due to influence of socialist ideology, the EPRDF is known in the party disciple. However, this is not in the intra–party democracy in terms of granting political space and power sharing for other member parties as stressed by respondents. In terms of the centralization of power by dominant EPRDF party and vertical and horizontal asymmetries, there is strong similarity between the federalism of the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. Like the Communist Party of the Soviet federation, which was disproportionally dominated by Russians, the TPLF dominated EPRDF provides political leadership to all of the ethnic regions either through its member organizations or affiliates. This may warrant characterizing the Ethiopian federalism as 'national in form' and 'revolutionary democracy in content' by borrowing one of the well-known adages of Soviet federalism–'national in form' but socialist in content (Asnake, 2013). One of the causes for the disintegration of the Soviet federation was a systemic problem in the design of the federal system coupled with authoritarian system and deep–rooted asymmetry. Like the Belgian federal system, the Ethiopian federal system is based on ethnicity. However, there are striking differences between the two systems. In Belgium, the federal system is systematically designed in a manner to reduce the negative consequences of politicizing and formalizing ethnicity as the basis of federation. Very strong and democratic mechanisms for co–operation were established in the federal institutions, which enable the ethnic groups to freely co–operate and negotiate at the centre in the Belgian system. This, however, seems lacking in the Ethiopian system. These mechanisms have become the main reasons for the sustainability of the Belgian federal system.

Ethnicity and practice of ethnic federal system in Ethiopia

The FDRE constitution of 1995 adopted the Soviet practices of hierarchically categorizing its ethnic groups into 'nation, nationality and people'. In the ex–Soviet system, Joseph Stalin arranged numerous Soviet nationalities according to hierarchy of recognition. In the multi–level Soviet ethnic federation, the location of the ethnic groups is determined in accordance with this hierarchy of recognition. The historic factors that led to the creation of the Soviet Union as a multi–tiered ethnic federation was not, however, based on ideals of equality or democracy, but upon an order of preferences dictated by factors such as location, size, stability and the dominance in its area by the nationality group. Indeed, the ethnic–based territorial organization of Ethiopia's ethnic federalism seemed to have been influenced by the

Soviet experience of 'multi–tiered' ethnic federation.

In the FDRE constitution, ethnic group is labeled as 'Nation, Nationality and Peoples' (in Amharic, *behieroch, behiereseboch, enahezboch*). These terms are predominant in the contemporary Ethiopian political and constitutional legal rhetoric. The FDRE Constitution defines a 'Nation, Nationality and People' (NNP) as clearly distinguishable cultural groups akin to the primordial assumption of ethnicity (art.39/5). From this constitutional definition, one can identify a number of primordial traits attributed to ethnicity in the context of Ethiopia: people, culture or custom, language, belief in common or related identity, psychological makeup and territory. Accordingly, an ethnic group in Ethiopia can be defined as people with their own common culture or custom, language, identity, psyche, and contiguous territory. The constitution provides a single definition and no distinction is made between these distinct terms- 'Nation, Nationality and People'. Implicitly, this categorization indicates a hierarchy among ethnic groups in Ethiopia.

Within the formalized ethnic politics, any cultural group that wishes to have a self–governing administrative structure needs to be recognized as either 'nation, nationality or people'. Accordingly, defining the ethnic identity of several smaller groups has emerged as an arena of local/regional (re)negotiation of identity and statehood (Asnake, 2010). This is particularly evident in the multi–ethnic regional states. In the House of Federation (HoF), the upper house that interpret the constitution, uses the constitutionally stipulated primordial criteria (art.39/5) to determine cultural groups' ethnic status to grant the right to ethnic self-governance for those groups fulfilling the criteria of the constitution which has already been set. In other words, a political body from outside determine ethnic status and grants the right to self–rule. This was evident in the process of granting separate ethnic status for Silte from Gurage after fierce and violent identity conflict. Under the auspices of HoF, Silte declared an independent ethnic group status by referendum and managed to get their own separate Zone. One can observe clear paradoxical combination between instrumental uses and primordial definition of ethnicity to determine ethnic status and grant the right to self–rule. As evidenced by 'making and remaking' of regions and local PDOs, granting the right to self–rule for ethnic group is not an end in itself in Ethiopia. If it is an end in itself, it must be granted for some major ethnic groups in the SNNPRS as reported by respondents.

According to the FDRE constitution, the federal restructuring is basically demarcated on the basis of "consent of the people concerned, settlement patterns, identity and language" (Art.46/2). However, the "consent did not play any part in the formation of the region. If self–determination is decided by consent of ethnic groups' concerned, major ethnic groups in the SNNPRS, like Sidama, would never accept amalgamation of their regions. All informants stressed that former five regions were merged without any discussion and negotiation by the decision of the party at the centre.

Consistently, Berhanu (2007) points out that 'the Sidama denied the regional status not by consent but by force.' And yet, no ethnic group will intentionally agree to stratify at zonal status if they have the choice to be at regional state status. Contrary to the constitutional principles, 'all regions in Ethiopia were selected and delimited by the TPLF without genuine and open public discussions' (Mesfin, 1999). The decision to determine a certain level of political or administrative status to nation, nationality and people solely rests upon the vanguard party, the EPRDF. This is similar to the practice of the Soviet federation. In the Soviet multi–tiered territorial administrative structure, the power to determine the political status of a given nationality group rested with the communist party or Kremlin (Slocum, 1995).

The population size is not mentioned in the constitution and not used as criteria to restructure the state so far. As stressed by informants, if population size had been used as criteria, the tiny minority Hareri would not have allowed a separate region while others with population over millions in the SNNPRS denied regional status. Despite persistent violent struggles, the government refused allowing the regional state status for Sidama. This instrumentally motivated inconsistency in the ethnic federal system is seen by many informants as discriminatory practice. The hierarchical arrangement of ethnic groups as nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia seems more evident when one considers the territorial organization of the Ethiopia federation. Similar to soviet–styled ethnic federal arrangement, Ethiopia pursued a multi–tiered approach to identity based territorial autonomy in which apparently the bigger ethnic groups were given their own regions as core "nations" in which they constitute the majority and the regions were designated by their own names.

On the other hand, several dozen smaller ethnic groups or "nationalities" and "people" were merged together into 'multi–ethnic' regions: SNNPRS, Gambella and Benishangul–Gumuz. Even within these regions, government granted ethnic self–governance very inconsistently all according to the political interest of the party in power. Sub–regional status or zonal/ Special Woreda level of self–administration was granted for regionally dominant ethnic groups while other smaller groups were either merged together in the multi–ethnic zones or subsumed under ethnically designated Zones.

As it has been mentioned earlier on, nine regional states were established each with legislative, executive and judiciary branches. Broader political autonomy is granted including the right to secede from the federation (art.47/2). The state sovereignty is vested on the nations' nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia. This, however, departs from the traditional trends of ascribing sovereignty to the 'people' in general. Theoretically, nations',

nationalities and peoples' are granted the right to self–determination up to secession; granted the right to develop language, culture and history; recognized the right to a full measure of self–governance (at the local level); accorded the right to fair and equitable representation at the federal and regional governments (art.39/1–4). Territorially concentrated smaller ethnic groups that are currently not granted the rights to self–rule have already granted to establish separate self–governance to establish separate regional states or they have the right to establish separate statehood at any time.

There are some paradoxes in the EPRDF power politics that are difficult to explain. Political decision to determine ethnic identity status and recognize the ethnic right to self-governances is made by vanguard party at the centre as reported by informants. There has not been an attempt to allow ethnic groups to decide on their own identity and their right to self–rule. It is rather the political regime that grant from outside the right to self–determination for ethnic groups (Temesgen, 2011; Aalen, 2008). The process of granting the right to self–determination, ethnic equality has been violated in two ways: first, by imposing identity on the people and arbitrarily creating ethnic regions, and; second, by arbitrarily stratifying ethnic groups: some at regional level, others at zonal level and still so many others at woreda and *kebelle* levels of administrative hierarchy without any clear criteria. The criteria for granting ethnic regional status were very vague and arbitrary as stressed by informants. This is evident in the case of the minority Hareri regional status and denial of the same right for the 5th largest Sidama group in Ethiopia.

Indeed, there are striking similarities in the practice of the Ethiopian federal system to the ex– Soviet Union federation. Towster (1951) points out that one of the core principles of Soviet federalism is that in theory it provided ethnic self–determination up to secession, but in practice never allowed autonomy beyond culture and language (Asnake, 2009). The initial assumption of the Soviet federal system along with the right to self–determination was to bring the different republics together. This recognition of the right to self–determination contributed to bring some republics voluntarily to the Union (Watts, 1991). Nevertheless, once the Union was established, the right to self–determination was not genuinely implemented due to the democratic centralist approach of the Bolshevik party (ibid). These practices were transplanted in federal Ethiopia. Even if Ethiopia's federal Constitution recognizes 'unlimited' self–determination like Soviet federation, it is clear from the experience of ethnic federal system in Ethiopia that the ethnic regions are not allowed to exercise administrative autonomy let alone secession.

According to informants, the regime in power is using ethnicity and the right to self–determination for political expediency to handle ethnic diversity according to its own desires instead of genuinely empowering ethnic groups in the country. The following statement by Meles Zenawi, the late Prime Minister and chairman of the EPRDF, seems to corroborate this:

There is no way the secession could take place one fine morning simply because the right is embodied in the constitution. As a matter of fact, the secession clause was put into the constitution in order to avoid such an eventuality (quoted in Abbink, 2006: 394).

Despite the constitutional system, the government has difficulty in adhering to it. The EPRDF relies more on a centralized party system than on the federal compact and federal institutions. The government practices democratic centralism and top-down ideology-driven policy and decision making. However, this practice sharply contradicts the constitutionally proclaimed principles of self–rule and state autonomy (Medhane and Young, 2003; Assefa, 2012). Consistently, Jon Abbink (2006) further adds that the specific model of "revolutionary democracy" officially espoused by the ruling EPRDF, the party built around the TPLF, represents in many ways a contradiction to the proclaimed constitutional principles. Undoubtedly, this will have its own consequence. It is noted by informants that the federal system and other constitutionally established institutions have not yet well entrenched in Ethiopia. There is a fear that 'once the ruling party loses control of power, the fate of the federal system will be uncertain or will wither away with it' (Clapham, 2009). The EPRDF's power politics has been creating unforeseeable effects that have been difficult for the government to control. The constitutionally promised principles of the right to self–rule and paradoxes associated with its implementation are source of ethnic-based conflicts in the country.

The politics of ethnic self-governance and conflicts in the SNNPRS

It seems that the EPRDF power politics is full of contradictions, ambiguity and uncertainty. There is clear inconsistency between the EPRDF power politics and the constitutional all–embracing right given to ethnically defined groups. This inconsistency was succinctly stated by Lovise Aalen as follows:

The EPRDF's power politics is in itself conflict producing: when communities that have defined themselves along ethnic lines are denied the right to self–rule in the SNNPRS, it creates a difference between the principles and practices that produce anger and discontent (2008:190).

As it has been discussed earlier on, although the constitution stated ethnic groups in the country

intersectionally as 'Nations, Nationalities and Peoples', it provides a single primordial explanation. This, however, brings the presumption that there are nations, nationalities, and peoples who seek self–determination up to secession in their own right. As no clear distinction is so far made between these three entities, any group that can demonstrate the ownership of the constitutional primordial attributes can claim the right to self–determination of any sort, regardless of whether it is a nation, or a nationality or a people.

For instance, the profile of Southern nations, nationalities and peoples, which was published in 2004 (Ethiopian Calendar) by SNNPRS Council of Nationality, labeled all ethnic groups, ranging from the largest Sidama to the smallest Dime – 981 total population – in the region as "nationalities". Indeed, this clearly indicates ambiguity associated with the use of these terminologies. In their struggle for regional status, the Sidama are also claiming "nation" status but government remains unwilling to address the demand in accordance with the constitutional principles and procedures. For the previous socialist military regime, Ethiopia, being a pre–capitalist and feudal state, is premature to host "nations". Accordingly, this regime decided that there are only "nationalities" that deserve equal recognition and protection in Ethiopia. Contrarily, the EPRDF argued that there are "nations" (without clear criteria to make distinctions) which need to exercise their right to self–determination up to secession in Ethiopia. Indeed, this is an evidence for full of ambiguity in the politics of ethnicity in Ethiopia.

In the multi–tiered ethnic–based federal restructuring, fitting into the federal system has been straight forward for major ethnic groups or "nations". As we have seen, the major ethnic groups were allowed to have their own regions while several smaller ethnic groups or "nationalities" and "people" were merged together to form multi–ethnic regions. In all levels of hierarchy ranging from region to *woreda*, granting a certain level of administrative status to ethnic groups solely depends upon the EPRDF party (Temesgen, 2011). This is to the extent that ethnic groups were hierarchically categorized within the multi–ethnic regions. As mentioned by informants, some major ethnic groups were allowed to have zone designated by their own names while so many other groups were either merged together at some multi-ethnic zones or subsumed within ethnically designated Zones.

The 'making and remaking' of regions and local ethnic-based political parties ended up by conglomerating 56 ethnic groups of former five regions under a single region. Accordingly, the politics of granting self–governance is very complex. Although it is not to the level of their satisfaction, the major ethnic groups were empowered at sub–regional level of self–administrations named after specific ethnic groups as reported by informants. However, several smaller groups are merged together in the multi-ethnic zones, like South Omo and Segen Area Peoples Zones. Still, some others are subsumed as minorities under ethnically designated Zones, such as Gamo-Goffa, Bench-Maji, Gurage, Kaffa and Sheka. Subsuming ethnic groups under one has serious implications when understood in the context of an ethnic federalism. In ethnic Zones, as stressed by respondents, the groups dominate the local political process, determine the set of values, command the local public institutions and resources and they are the ones represented in the regional and federal government institutions. Accordingly, subsumed smaller ethnic groups under ethnic Zones are declared invisible from the political process at all levels of governments. According to informants, this is one of key factor that compel subsumed ethnic groups to demand separate self-governance and associated ethnic violence in the study region.

Despite constitutional promise for broader ethnic autonomy, most ethnic groups still remain far from exercising the right to self-governance. Currently, most ethnic groups in the SNNPRS do not have their own self–administrative structure at zonal or special *woreda* levels. Vander Beken rightly points out this issue:

Most of the southern state's 50+ ethnic groups do not have their own zone/special woreda. These groups either live in a multi-ethnic zone orare a minority group in a zone dominated by another group (2008:23).

The constitution allows ethnic groups, which currently do not have their own region or Zones, to establish, at any time, a separate self-governance. Practically, however, government does not allow ethnic groups to exercise these constitutionally entrenched rights despite deadly struggle subsumed groups, for instance by, Goffa and Kabena ethnic groups as reported by respondents. As the decision is made at the level of the EPRDF party, there are some paradoxes associated with granting the right to self–determination. Generally speaking, ethnic rights to self-determination up to secession are a pseudo rights as the EPRDF regime does not allow exercising these rights (Merera, 2007). The constitutional right to establish separate ethnic regions at any time has not been exercised until this day albeit violent struggles by Sidama in the SNNPRS. Practically, as stressed by informants, the ethnic right to self–determination is never allowed beyond culture and language autonomy.

The subsumed ethnic groups are minorities and invisible from the political process at all levels of government institutions. This has serious implication in the ethnic–based federal system. As Kymlicka (2006) notes, the ethno–nationalist groups should not be allowed to govern their own regional states unless a clear guarantee for minority rights is stipulated and enforced. He further emphasizes that there is a fear that once national minorities acquire self–governing power at sub–

state level, they might use it to prosecute, dispossess, expel or kill anyone who does not belong to their group (ibid). Both at regional and sub–regional levels, Ethiopia's case prove that the process of empowering ethno–nationalist groups at sub–state level was conducted 'without putting relevant institutional and policy mechanisms to protect the rights of a subsumed minority group in place' (Assefa, 2012). As stressed by informants, this has remained a serious political challenge for subsumed ethnic groups in the SNNPRS.

Accordingly, in the post 1990s period, minority have appeared not only in the traditional sense of political minority but also in terms of new trends of creating *minorities—within—minorities*. In spite of its relative appeal to the context of the multi–ethnic pluralism and apart from fears of the African states to the potential impact of ethnically constructed federalism, the phenomenon of *minorities—within—minorities* within federal arrangement also further complicates the federal solution in addressing the minority claims. The EPRDF's 'making and remaking' of regions in the SNNPRS has anomaly created *minority–within–minority* in the SNNPRS. The nature of sub–regional ethnic–based federal restructuring is typical instance of creating *minorities—within—minorities* that could compel subsumed groups to fight for separate identity and ethnic autonomy in accordance with the constitutional promise. Politics of formalized ethnicity has been serving as particular impetus not only for inter–ethnic contestation and conflicts but also for continuous (re) construction of–real or imagined–ethnic identities to get separate self-governance.

Against the principle of the constitution and ethnic federal system, the government adopted artificially constructed Omotic WOGAGODA language. It was constructed as standardized language of local administration and education for all ethnic groups merged together in the multi–ethnic Simen (north) Omo zone. Literally, people with great culture, WOGAGODA language was constructed from the first two letters of Wolaita, Gamo, Goffa and Dawro ethnic groups, respectively. As a triggering and powerfully exacerbating catalyst of conflict, WOGAGODA led to violent resistance, human atrocity and material destruction as reported by informants. Losing its initial convictions, the government withdrew WOGAGODA and allowed the disintegration of the Simen Omo Zone into five sub-regional administrative units: Dawro, Gamo–Gofa, Wolayta, Basketo and Konta.   After prolonged ethnic violence for separate self–governance by the Sheka ethnic group, the government allowed the division of Kaffa zone into Kaffa and Sheka ethnic zones.   The Gurage Zone was also divided after recognizing distinct identity status for Silte from larger Gurage by referendum. The Silte group allowed establishing a separate Zone.

Constitutionally correlating ethnicity and the right to ethnic self–rule is encouraging various cultural groups to be mobilized to assert separate identity and self–governance in the SNNPRS. By emulating the 'Silte model', cultural groups of Wollene and Kucha are embarked on identity conflicts as reported by respondents. As stressed by informants, the government addresses ethnic demands for separate identity and self-governance very inconsistently and all according to political interest and circumstances. All those demands for separate self–governance by Wolaita, Sheka, Ale and Silte were achieved after a series of violence and human atrocity. All violent demands for regional status by Sidama, separate zonal status by Goffa, Special Woreda status by Kabena, and distinct identity status by Wollene and Kucha have remained unrealized despite violence and human atrocities.

According to respondents, the ethnic quest for self–rule is considered by the government as anti–dote to the overall aims of administrative integration in the SNNPRS. If self-determination leads to disintegration of SNNPRS and undermine the country's unity, self-rule for ethnic groups should be denied (Aalen, 2008). This sharply contradicts with the constitutional, all-embracing right given to groups, defined along primordial criteria to self-determination (ibid). While fulfilling the primordial criteria the constitution which has already been set, the ruling party did practice the right very inconsistently. In this regard, Abbink (2006) also notes that 'the constitution confirmed the new regions, and on paper gave them far–reaching administrative autonomy, but in practice an informal control or brake system was in place in Ethiopia'. Thus, it is not the constitutional principles but the EPRDF politics that determines a certain level of administrative status to ethnic groups. For the EPRDF regime, ethnic mobilization should only be allowed as long as it serves overall political ends. It is not ethnic identity which is valued for its own sake for granting the right to ethnic self–rule but its instrumental use to reach political aims. The right to self–rule was adopted for not genuinely empowering ethnic groups but for instrumentally using it for political expediency.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has examined inter-relationship between ethnic federalism and ethnic-based conflicts in the context of the SNNPRS of Ethiopia. Although ethnic federation along with the right to self–rule was adopted as a novel approach to create a new legitimate basis to the Ethiopian state, the record of ethnic–based federal system remains troublesome. As the nature of Ethiopia's federal system is ethnic, it has triggered its own types of conflicts that are peculiar to the kind of federalism adopted. The Ethiopian federal system has overe-mphasized the rights of a few dominant ethnic groups as core "nations" and has failed to grant political autonomy for some major ethnic groups, like Sidama, and several

smaller ethnic groups in Ethiopia in general and SNNPRS in particular. It failed to comprehensively respond in accordance with the constitutional promise to the quest for a better regime of smaller ethnic groups' rights protection.

The study result revealed that ethnicity and the right to ethnic self–rule are instrumentally used by the government for ideological and political motives rather than genuinely empowering ethnic groups. As discussed in the study, Ethnicity is primordially defined in the Constitution but instrumentally used for political ends. Ethnicity is a useful tool to achieve political motives as it is malleable, and can be manipulated and mobilized from *inside*, relying on peoples own cultural and knowledge system. However, this contradicts with the use of primordial ethnicity in the constitution for establishing nation, nationality and people to grant the right to ethnic self–rule up to secession. As a result of this ideologically and politically motivated use of ethnicity, ethnic groups are still far from exercising the right to self–rule. This has particularly been proved in the multi–ethnic SNNPRS.

As reviewed in the study, the areas comprising SNNPRS were organized into five regions during the EPRDF's interim period. However, the government unilaterally consolidated very diverse ethnic groups of former five regions into one after a decision made at the vanguard EPRDF party level. This 'making and remaking' has provoked ethnic based conflict for the establishment of a separate region by Sidama. Some subsumed ethnic groups, such as Goffa, and Kabena are violently struggling for separate self–governance. Certainly, conflict cannot be prevented and unity cannot be achieved by vanguard party control and military response but they can be achieved–fully or partially–if the ethnic rights to self–rule are respected and effectively protected.

The study result further indicated that the contradicting party politics in Ethiopia is jeopardizing the federal system itself and the institutionalization of democratic system in Ethiopia. Theoretically granting broader ethnic rights on the one hand and the political limits to their implementation on the other, is an important conflict generating factor. This is evident in the denial of regional status for Sidama despite persistent struggles and other several autonomy conflicts. Now, the ruling party should accept the consequences of the constitutional choices, to protect the constitutionally declared principle of federalism, to respect regional state autonomy and ethnic right to self–determination in Ethiopia. The federal system has the potential to guarantee sustainable unity and stability, through the protection of diversity, in Ethiopia if it is genuinely implemented beyond ideological and political motivation.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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