

Multiethnic Federalism in Ethiopia: A Study of the Secession Clause in the Constitution

Alem Habtu
Queens College/CUNY

In 1991, Ethiopia's new leaders established a multiethnic federation that provides for the right to secession. The secession clause was incorporated for reasons of ideology and necessity. The federation consists of largely ethnic-based territorial units and encourages political parties to organize along ethnic lines. The Ethiopian case is a radical departure from most other federal systems. This analysis focuses on (1) Ethiopia's secession clause, (2) the House of Federation, and (3) state-federal relations. The future of federalism in Ethiopia is unclear. The provisions of a liberal democratic constitution conflict with the reality of authoritarian centralist practice and therefore jeopardize the future of federalism. Although the secession clause has symbolic value, it is unlikely that any Ethiopian government would allow secession to take place.

In 1991, following the collapse of military rule, Ethiopia's new leaders established a federal system composed of largely ethnic-based territorial units.¹ The main purpose was to achieve ethnic and regional autonomy, while maintaining the state of Ethiopia as a political unit. The initial process of federalization lasted for four years and was formalized in a new constitution in 1995. Ethiopia's multiethnic federal system is significant when set alongside other federal systems because it provides for the secession of any ethnic territorial unit. The secession clause is one of the most controversial issues in Ethiopia and its diaspora communities today.²

Opponents of multiethnic federalism fear that it invites ethnic conflict and risks state disintegration.³ Ethiopia, they worry, might face the same

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¹The regional states that formed the federation were (1) Tigray, (2) Afar, (3) Amhara, (4) Oromia, (5) Somali, (6) Benishangul-Gumuz, (7–11) Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples (a “voluntary” merger of five regional states), (12) Gambella, (13) Harari, and (14) Addis Ababa. Later, Dire Dawa was put under federal jurisdiction, as was Addis Ababa, the federal capital.

²See various issues since 1991 of private print media in Ethiopia, including *Addis Tribune*, *Reporter* (Amharic and English), *Tobia* (Amharic); in the United States, see *Ethiopian Register* and *Ethiopian Review*, published in Los Angeles, CA. See also Minasse Haile, “The New Ethiopian Constitution: Its Impact upon Unity, Human Rights and Development,” *Suffolk Transitional Law Review* 20 (1, Winter 1996): 1–84.

³Marina Ottaway, *Democratization and Ethnic Nationalism: African and Eastern European Experiences* (Washington, DC: Overseas Development Council, 1994).

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fate as the USSR and Yugoslavia.⁴ Others of an ethnonationalist persuasion doubt the government's real commitment to self-determination; they support the multiethnic federal constitution per se but claim that it has not been put into practice.⁵ Finally, those who consider Ethiopia to be a colonial empire see the federal exercise as yet another colonial trick, and advocate "decolonization."⁶ To many critics, Ethiopia's federal system is a de facto one-party state in which ethnic organizations are mere satellites of one ethnic organization, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The TPLF is the leading unit in the multiethnic ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Supporters of multiethnic federalism claim that the new federal system has thus far maintained the unity of the Ethiopian peoples and the territorial integrity of the state, while providing full recognition to the principle of ethnic self-determination. Critics counter that the state has been maintained despite multiethnic federalism, not because of it. It is important to examine objectively whether multiethnic federalism, including the secession clause, is a viable way of resolving conflict between ethnonationalism and the larger nation-state. Now that the multiethnic federal experiment is more than a decade old, it is possible to make a preliminary appraisal of its performance.⁷

MULTIETHNIC FEDERALISM IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Following World War II and the start of decolonization, newly independent countries in Africa struggled to create viable nation-states combining different ethnic groups within the territorial boundaries inherited from colonialism.⁸ France was often the model nation-state par excellence.⁹ A nation-state on this model came to be regarded as a badge of modernity, whereas "tribalism" or "ethnicism" was associated with backwardness and was repudiated by modernizing elites.¹⁰ Many African countries followed

⁴Solomon Gashaw, "Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia," *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism*, ed. Crawford Young (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), pp. 138–157.

⁵Mohammed Hassen, "Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian State" (paper presented at the State Formation and Political Identities Seminar, Institute of African Studies, Columbia University, New York, NY, 6 April 2001).

⁶Asafa Jalata, ed., *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1998).

⁷The sources of data for this analysis include public documents, fieldwork, and interviews. The public documents consulted include the transitional charter and permanent constitution, relevant proclamations, government statistical data, government and private print media, state radio, and television. I spent several months during 2000–2002 observing political developments in the country as they pertain to multiethnic federalism. I also interviewed thirty Ethiopians, including public officials, nongovernmental organization officers, academics, intellectuals, and businesspersons.

⁸Benjamin Neuberger, "Federalism in Africa: Experience and Prospects," *Federalism and Political Integration*, ed. Daniel J. Elazar (Tel Aviv: Turtledove Publishing, 1979), pp. 171–188.

⁹Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 90.

¹⁰J. E. Goldthorpe, *The Sociology of Post-Colonial Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 154.

the nation-state model by attempting to create a unified nation out of disparate peoples.¹¹ Because most African countries are multiethnic, the Ethiopian experiment with multiethnic federalism is of special interest. The fact that Ethiopia was never colonized by Europeans and is one of the oldest states in the world makes the Ethiopian experiment with multiethnic federalism all the more intriguing. Ever since decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, the conventional wisdom in much of the African continent has been that ethnicity should not be the basis for establishing political parties or institutions. South Africa under apartheid was a major exception to this belief.¹² The 1960s in particular witnessed the rise of state nationalism in Africa.¹³ State nationalists attempted to undermine ethnic nationalism, which they saw as an obstacle to modern state formation. According to Anthony Smith, ethnic nationalism is a consequence of the development or, better still, politicization of ethnic consciousness by an ethnic community.¹⁴ The chief challenge of nation-state building was to replace ethnic identity with national identity, rather than simply superimpose the latter. In Uganda, to take an extreme example, the state altogether disallows ethnic parties; it champions a de-ethnicized unitary state.

Yet, the effects of ethnic identity on public life persist. Despite its official banishment from political life, ethnic nationalism has proved a potent political force throughout sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁵ Recognition of the importance people attach to ethnic identities and interests informs the Ethiopian experiment, which accommodates the institutional expression of ethnicity in public life. Ethiopia's multiethnic federalism encourages political parties to organize along ethnic lines, and it champions an ethnicized federal state. A brief review of a few federal systems among non-Western, communist, and Western countries is useful to understand the unique and radical aspects of the Ethiopian federal system better.

Among non-Western countries, Nigeria and India are notable for their federal systems and their commitment to cultural and structural pluralism. At the time of Nigeria's independence in 1960, the country's federal system consisted of three regions, each with a dominant ethnic group. In 1967, the first year of Biafra's war of secession, twelve states were created.

¹¹Benjamin Neuberger, "State and Nation in African Thought," *Nationalism*, eds. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 231-235.

¹²The new South African Constitution was carefully devised not to give expression to ethnicity in either its territorial or its organizational structure. I am indebted to an anonymous reader for this observation.

¹³Ghana became independent in 1957. Many African countries followed suit in the 1960s.

¹⁴Anthony D. Smith, "The Ethnic Sources of Nationalism," *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, ed. Michael E. Brown (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 35-37.

¹⁵M. A. M. Salih and John Markakis, *Ethnicity and the State in Eastern Africa* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1998), p. 7. As Brietzke observes, "the end of the Cold War has seen an explosion of ethnic nationalisms similar to the one occurring in Europe late in the nineteenth century." Paul H. Brietzke, "Ethiopia's 'Leap in the Dark': Federalism and Self-Determination in the New Constitution," *Journal of African Law* 39 (Fall 1995): 19.

By 1996, Nigeria had thirty-six states, in part so that ethnic groups and states would not correspond. Thus, in sharp contrast to Ethiopia's federal system, Nigerian federalism is not ethnicity based in structure and objective.¹⁶ From 1956 onward, the states in India were reorganized along ethnolinguistic lines, despite Nehru's fear of the potential consequences for national unity of such a restructuring.¹⁷ In fact, such fear led to a constitutional amendment in 1963 "to prevent the fissiparous, secessionist tendency."¹⁸ Indian federalism has a strong bias in favor of central authority. "The Constitution gives general supremacy to the Union Parliament and Executive in all matters vis-à-vis the states (vide: Article 365), especially in the making of laws on items included in the State List, in the appointment and dismissal of Governors, in the dismissal of State Ministry, in the appointment of Judges to the States' High Courts . . ." ¹⁹ Although the Ethiopian Constitution was inspired, in good part, by the Indian example, there are glaring contrasts. In the Indian Constitution, residual powers are vested in the Union (Articles 245–46, 249–54, 356), whereas in Ethiopia, they are vested in the regional states (Article 52). Further, whereas India's Constitution gives no right of secession to the states on the grounds that the "union is indestructible," ²⁰ Ethiopia's Constitution affirms the right of secession.

In the communist world, Yugoslavia and the USSR had constitutional arrangements that recognized the right to ethnic self-determination and secession. Yugoslavia's 1946 communist constitution gave this right to each republic. By 1974, Yugoslavia consisted of five "nations."²¹ However, Marshal Tito organized the federal system in such a way that there was no precise correspondence between ethnic territories and the various republics.²² Once the federation collapsed in 1992, ethnic cleansing forcibly made ethnic units coincide with political territories.²³ With regard to the USSR, Meles Zenawi, the prime minister of Ethiopia, observed, "In the former Soviet Union, they did have this right [of secession] written

¹⁶See Rotimi T. Suberu, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2001). See also a whole issue devoted to "Federalism in Nigeria: Toward Federal Democracy," edited by Lapido Adamolekun, *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 21 (Fall 1991).

¹⁷The discussion on India relies heavily on Rajeev Bhargava, "Federalism: The Indian Experience" (paper presented at the seminar on Multiethnic Federalism: The Challenge for Ethiopia, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, April 2004), pp. 1–23.

¹⁸Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 27n.

¹⁹Bhargava, "Federalism," 6–7.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Metta Spencer, ed. *Separatism: Democracy and Disintegration* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p. 162.

²²Bogdan Denitch, *Ethnic Nationalism: The Tragic Death of Yugoslavia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). A precise correspondence of "ethnic territories and the various republics" would have been impossible as all ethnic groups were largely intermixed. I am indebted to an anonymous reader for this observation.

²³The Yugoslav experience is, thus, not helpful to those who argue that federalization on other than ethnic criteria would avert "ethnic cleansing."

in the Constitution, but there, it was the prerogative of the Party, still more the Party boss.”²⁴ Nonetheless, the Soviet regime had created conditions that were conducive to the transformation of ethnic nationalism into state nationalism.²⁵ It institutionalized nationhood and nationality in many of the subnational units and, thus, inadvertently paved the way for its own disintegration in the early 1990s.²⁶

In comparing Ethiopia with the USSR and Yugoslavia, we can make at least three distinctions. First, although the federal constitutions of the USSR and Yugoslavia provided for secession, and both federations eventually collapsed, we can attribute the collapse far more to communism than to the secession provision. Second, whereas Communist parties controlled the politics of ethnic autonomy, there is no Communist Party in Ethiopia. Perhaps the ruling party (the EPRDF) plays a functionally equivalent role. Nonetheless, it is a coalition of ethnic parties, not a monolithic party. Third, unlike the USSR and Yugoslav constitutions, the Ethiopian one provides for political pluralism. Indeed, seventy-two political parties (all ethnic and regional, save sixteen) were officially registered with the National Electoral Board by December 2004.²⁷ The Ethiopian Constitution is also premised on liberal democratic conceptions of community and individual rights.

Finally, pluralist Western countries such as Switzerland, Belgium, and Canada formally recognize ethnolinguistic units and allocate political power (e.g., legislative and executive positions) on the basis of an ethnolinguistic formula.²⁸ One of the ways Ethiopia’s federalism differs from that of most other pluralist states, however, is in its allowance for the right of secession. The constitutional marrying of political pluralism and the right of secession makes Ethiopia’s multiethnic federalism virtually unique. Canada also recognizes secession, but not necessarily as a unilateral right. There was a referendum on Quebec sovereignty in 1980, and again in 1995, when sovereignty advocates lost by less than 1 percent.²⁹

ETHNIC DIVERSITY AND THE ETHIOPIAN STATE: AN OVERVIEW

A brief overview of ethnic diversity in Ethiopia will be helpful in understanding the conflicting images of the state and state-mandated

²⁴Constitutional Commission of the Transitional Government, “Debate on the Draft Constitution at the Council of Representatives,” *Transitional Government of Ethiopia Constitutional Commission Newsletter* 3 (May 1994): 6.

²⁵Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 24.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 29.

²⁷“NEB registers EDF as national political party,” <http://www.enmedia.com/enlive.php?subaction=showfull&id=1101743134&archive=&...> (accessed 3 December 2004).

²⁸Martin N. Marger, *Race and Ethnic Relations* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), p. 127.

²⁹See Reg Whitaker, “Quebec: A Unique Case of Secession,” *Separatism*, ed. Metta Spencer, pp. 281–306.

alternative strategies of social engineering over the past century. Ethiopia has great ethnic diversity, with seventy-nine ethnic groups.³⁰ The two major ethnic groups alone, the Oromo and the Amhara, constitute more than 62 percent of the population. The third largest ethnic group, the Tigraway, has been the politically dominant ethnic group since 1991, but makes up only 6 percent of the population. Military prowess, not numerical strength, gave the Tigraway political dominance in 1991 and thereafter. These three ethnic groups constitute more than two-thirds of the population. In 1994, four other ethnic groups—Somali, Gurage, Sidama, and Welaita—had populations of more than 1 million each. Five other ethnic groups—Afar, Hadiya, Gamo, Gedeo, and Keffa—had populations between 599,000 and 1 million each. Thus, the twelve largest ethnic groups constitute almost 92 percent of Ethiopia's population.³¹ They each have a population of more than half a million, out of a national population of 53 million in 1994 (see Tables 1 and 2).³² By and large, ethnic groups are also territorially concentrated. For the most part, each ethnic group has its own language.

The languages of Ethiopia belong to four language families: Ethio-Semitic, Cushitic, Omotic, and Nilo-Saharan. There are twelve Ethio-Semitic languages, including Amharic and Tigrinya; twenty-two Cushitic languages, including Oromiffa, Somali, Sidamigna, and Afarigna; eighteen Omotic languages, including Welaitigna and Keffigna; and eighteen Nilo-Saharan languages, including Gumuz, Nuer, and Anyuak.³³ Cultural assimilation, with Amharic as the language of administration and instruction, was the policy during the imperial and military periods. However, cultural and language pluralism characterize Ethiopia's post-1991 multiethnic federalism. Although Amharic is the working language of the federal government, state television and radio media broadcast in Oromiffa and Tigrinya as well. Furthermore, each regional state has the right to choose its own working language. In addition to Addis Ababa (the federal capital) and Dire Dawa (also under federal jurisdiction), four regional states (Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambela, and the polyglot south) have chosen Amharic as their working language.³⁴ Indeed,

³⁰Throughout this article, the term "ethnic groups" is used generically as shorthand for the official term "nations, nationalities and peoples." The estimate of the number of ethnic groups in Ethiopia ranges from sixty-three (the number given by the transitional government in 1991) to eighty-four (based on the number of languages in the country). It has not been possible to find a consistently used number. The latest census (1994) lists seventy-nine ethnic groups. That number is used here. Other countries with high ethnic diversity include the United States, Canada, Russia, India, and Nigeria.

³¹See Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Central Statistical Authority, *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia: Results at Country Level Volume II Analytical Report* (Addis Ababa: Central Statistical Authority, June 1999), pp. 41–43.

³²The population was estimated to be over 70 million in 2004, but no census has been taken since 1994.

³³Lionel M. Bender, J. Donald Bowen, Robert Cooper, and Charles Ferguson, eds., *Language in Ethiopia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

³⁴Amharic had already emerged as the lingua franca of Ethiopia by the time the monarchy was abolished.

Table 1
Distribution of major ethnic groups in Ethiopia, 1994^a

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

^aThe last census was taken in 1994. The next census (constitutionally mandated for every ten years, i.e., 2004) has been postponed to 2006.

Source: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Central Statistical Authority, *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia Results at Country Level Volume II Analytical Report* (Addis Ababa: CSA, June 1999), pp. 41–43.

Amharic is the second language of approximately 10 percent of the Ethiopian population. In comparison, Oromiffa is the second language of only 3 percent of the population.³⁵ In the federal court system, the working language is Amharic; in the regional state system, the working language is left to the discretion of the regional state. The courts are also free to use the Ge'ez (Classical Ethiopic) script, as Amharic does, or a non-Ethiopic script.

The religious composition of the population is as follows: Christian (61.7 percent), Muslim (32.8 percent), traditional (4.6 percent), others (0.9 percent), and not stated (0.1 percent). Orthodox Christians constitute

³⁵Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Central Statistical Authority, *1994 Population and Housing Census*, pp. 46–48.

Table 2
Population of Ethiopia by regional state and number of ethnic groups in each regional state, 2001^a

Regional state	Population	Number of ethnic groups
Tigray	3,901,000	3
Afar	1,272,000	1
Amhara	17,205,000	5
Oromia	23,704,000	1
Somali	3,898,000	1
Benishangul-Gumuz	565,000	5
Southern nations, nationalities, and peoples	13,293,000	46
Gambella	222,000	4
Harari	172,000	1
Addis Ababa	2,646,000	Not applicable
Dire Dawa	342,000	Not applicable
Total	67,220,000	67

^aPopulation data here are only a projected estimate based on the last census (1994). No data on distribution of ethnic groups have been published since the 1994 census. Source: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Central Statistical Authority, *Ethiopia Statistical Abstract 2001* (Addis Ababa: Central Statistical Authority, March 2002), p. 24; *Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia House of Federation Secretariat Current List 2002* (Addis Ababa: House of Federation Secretariat, 2002).

50.6 percent of the total population, Protestants 10.2 percent, and Roman Catholics 0.9 percent.³⁶ The “traditional” category above refers to those Ethiopians who follow indigenous religions. Ethiopian Jews, known as Bete Israel or Falasha, numbered roughly 100,000 in the recent past, but virtually all of them have emigrated to Israel during the past two decades. Traditionally, they were artisans (mainly potters); they did not farm, as they were denied access to land.³⁷

The history of state formation in Ethiopia is a source of profound contention. At one extreme, pan-Ethiopian nationalists contend that the state is some 3,000 years old. According to this perspective, well represented by Solomon Gashaw, the state has existed for millennia, successfully countering ethnic and regional challenges, and forging a distinct national identity. The assimilation of periphery cultures into the Amhara or Amhara/Tigray core culture made the creation of the Ethiopian nation possible.³⁸ From this point of view, Ethiopia is a melting

³⁶Ibid., 56.

³⁷There are some 20,000 Falash Mura (Ethiopians of Jewish ancestry who had converted to Christianity under economic or social pressure) now living in Addis Ababa and Gondar who are awaiting *aliya*, emigration to Israel under the Law of Entry. See “Falasha Mura Compound to Reopen in Addis,” *The Daily Monitor*, 17 March 2005, pp. 1 and 6.

³⁸According to Solomon Gashaw, “The Ethiopian ruling classes cannot be identified with a particular ethnic group. They are a multi-ethnic group whose only common factors are that they are *Christians, Amharic speakers, and claim lineage to the Solomonic line*,” Gashaw, “Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict,” p. 142 (emphasis added).

pot and a *nation*-state. At the other extreme, ethnonationalist groups such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) claim that Abyssinia (central and northern Ethiopia, the geographic core of the Ethiopian polity) colonized more than half the territories and peoples to form a colonial empire in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.³⁹ From their vantage point, Ethiopia is a colonial empire that needs to undergo decolonization whereby “ethnonational” colonies become independent states.⁴⁰ A more credible image of Ethiopia would be as a historically evolved (noncolonial) *empire*-state.⁴¹ The ancient Ethiopian state—short-term contractions in size notwithstanding—expanded, over a long historical period, through the conquest and incorporation of adjoining kingdoms, principalities, sultanates, and so on, which is indeed how most states in the world were formed.

Adopting the French model, modern Ethiopian governments attempted to forge cultural homogenization through state centralization and a one-language policy during most of the twentieth century. In the span of a century, there were three forms of ethnic social engineering. The first social-engineering project was designed by Emperor Menelik II (1889–1913) but significantly elaborated by Emperor Haile Selassie I (1930–1936, 1941–1974). Both rulers attempted to create a unitary state on the basis of cultural assimilation, using Amharic as the sole language of public instruction and discourse and Abyssinian Orthodox Christianity as the core culture of national identity. This effort was in keeping with the pan-Ethiopian nationalist perspective, but it ultimately failed. Rising ethnic and regional discontent contributed to the revolution of 1974 and the demise of the monarchy.⁴²

The second ethnic social-engineering program (1974–1991) was the military government’s attempt to maintain a unitary state (with unfulfilled promises of regional autonomy) on the basis of Marxism-Leninism. This program made some gestures toward cultural pluralism in its National Literacy Campaign (1979–1991) and in its television and radio broadcast of folk music and folk dance. According to the military regime’s 1987 constitution, Ethiopia was a unitary state: “The People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia shall ensure the equality of nationalities, combat chauvinism and narrow nationalism [*sic*], and strengthen the unity of the working people of all nationalities” (Article 2.2). Paul Brietzke observed, “In true Leninist fashion . . . Mengistu’s style of governance was

³⁹Herbert S. Lewis, “Ethnicity in Ethiopia: The View from Below (and from the South, East, and West),” *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism*, ed. Crawford Young (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), p. 160.

⁴⁰Jalata, *Oromo Nationalism*

⁴¹See Donald N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

⁴²See Alem Habtu, “Books on the Ethiopian Revolution: A Review Essay,” *Socialism and Democracy* 3 (Fall/Winter 1986): 27–60.

universalist and unitarist in the extreme; through 'popular' mobilizations, 'the masses' were to be emancipated from their nationalities as well as their class."⁴³ In the last years of its rule, the military regime created twenty-four administrative regions and five autonomous regions within the unitary state, but no devolution of authority was discernible.⁴⁴ Ethnic-based opposition organizations intensified their assault on the military government. Thus, ethnic nationalism emerged as a major political question and was a major factor in the demise of the centralizing military regime.

The third ethnic social-engineering project (from 1991 to the present), under investigation here, is the EPRDF government's attempt to maintain the Ethiopian state on the basis of multiethnic federalism while providing for the right of secession. What factors propelled the EPRDF to construct multiethnic federalism? The short answer is that it was largely a consequence of political necessity and ideological orientation. Ethnonationalist movements grew immensely during the long period of military rule (1974–1991). Apart from the Eritrean nationalist movements, the major ethnic organizations included the TPLF, the OLF, and the Afar Liberation Front (ALF); smaller organizations included the Islamic Oromo Liberation Front (IOLF), the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), and the Ogadeni National Liberation Front (ONLF). The last two were also instruments of the irredentist Republic of Somalia and enjoyed its backing. Ethnonationalist organizations posed the gravest threat to the military regime and to the unity and territorial integrity of the country. Indeed, it was the TPLF/EPRDF and, to a much lesser extent, the Oromo, Afar, and Somali movements that, in collaboration with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), brought down the military regime in May 1991. The TPLF, OLF, ALF, and WSLF had sought secession before the collapse of the military junta. They were willing to come together to forge a new constitutional arrangement they could all live with, provided the secession option was made part of the compact.

The ideological antecedents of the EPRDF's multiethnic federalism project can be traced to the front's Marxist-Leninist ideology and its conception of "the national question." The project followed the examples of the USSR and Yugoslavia. The Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) had introduced Marxism-Leninism to Ethiopia in the mid-1960s. "The national question" had soon after emerged as the burning question for the ESM. It should be noted that, outside the purview of intellectual movements, there were protoethnic, ethnonationalist, nationalist, peasant, and pastoralist struggles occurring across the country, such as the Woyane revolt of the early 1940s in Tigray, the Eritrean liberation movements of the early 1960s,

⁴³Brietzke, "Ethiopia's 'Leap in the Dark,'" 20.

⁴⁴See Gashaw, "Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict," p. 154. Gashaw informs us that he was a member of the military regime's Institute for the Study of Nationalities.

the Gojjam revolt in the mid-1960s, and the armed movements of the 1960s and 1970s in Bale and Ogaden in association with Somalia's irredentism. The ESM was initially divided on the "correct" resolution of the national question. In the end, it attempted to legitimate ethnonationalism within the ideological compass of Marxism-Leninism, marking a radical departure from the pan-Ethiopianist ideology.⁴⁵

The ESM saw the resolution of the national question as lying within the framework of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of "the right of nations to self-determination, up to and including secession." By 1971, this doctrine was adopted by the ESM worldwide.⁴⁶ When the ESM gave birth to Marxist-Leninist political parties, notably the Mela Ityopia Socialist Niqinaqe (MEISON) in 1968 and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) in 1975, it also bequeathed them this doctrine. When the military junta adopted the Marxist-Leninist orientation of the ESM, it conspicuously rejected "the right of secession" doctrine. But other ethnonationalist organizations, including the OLF and TPLF, made "the right of nations to self-determination, up to and including secession" their organizing principle and *raison d'être*.⁴⁷ When the TPLF assumed power in 1991, in alliance with the OLF and other ethnonationalist groups, this doctrine became the basis for constructing a new (federal) state. The declared objective of the framers of multiethnic federalism was to transform the centralized dictatorial state into a decentralized democratic state of ethnic pluralism⁴⁸ in order to ensure that no ethnic community would find it necessary or desirable to secede.

THE SECESSION CLAUSE, THE HOUSE OF FEDERATION, AND STATE-FEDERAL RELATIONS

This section will discuss the rationale for (1) the secession clause in the transition charter and in the 1995 constitution, (2) the creation of the House of Federation, and (3) state-federal relations. The rationale can be found in the debates in the Council of Representatives and the Constituent Assembly; fundamentally, it was to ensure a sense of equality for all ethnic groups in the federation.

⁴⁵Students at Addis Ababa University and abroad were principal formulators and advocates of the national question in the late 1960s and early 1970s. See Alem Habtu, "Reflections on the Ethiopian Student Movement in North America (1965-70)," *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on the Horn of Africa* (New York: Center for the Study of the Horn of Africa, 1987), pp. 65-70; Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1974* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 1991), p. 225; Jalata, *Oromo Nationalism*, p. 9.

⁴⁶The "old ESUNA" (Ethiopian Students Union in North America) was probably the only student organization to refuse to subscribe to this doctrine.

⁴⁷After all, it is former students who also created these ethnonationalist organizations in the early to mid-1970s.

⁴⁸Some Ethiopianist scholars see democracy and multiethnic federalism as mutually exclusive. See, for example, Theodore M. Vestal, *Ethiopia: A Post-Cold War African State* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), p. 207.

The Transition Charter and the Secession Clause

The TPLF-spearheaded multiethnic coalition convened a national conference in July 1991 and quickly established the Transitional Government of Ethiopia under a transition charter. Twenty-seven political groups participated in the charter conference.⁴⁹ According to the preamble of the transition charter, henceforth “self-determination of all the peoples shall be [one of] the governing principles of political, economic and social life.”⁵⁰ It underlined the need to end all ethnic hostilities, heal wounds, and create peace and stability.⁵¹ The charter affirmed the right to self-determination of all “nations, nationalities and peoples” (Article 2)⁵² and provided for the establishment of local and regional governments “on the basis of nationality” (Article 13). It also stipulated that “the Head of State, the Prime Minister, the Vice-Chairperson and Secretary of the Council of Representatives shall be from different nations/nationalities” (Article 9b). Article 2 of the transition charter reads:

The right of nations, nationalities and peoples to self-determination is affirmed. To this end, each nation, nationality and people is guaranteed the right to:

- a.) Preserve its identity and have it respected, promote its culture and history and use and develop its language;
- b.) Administer its own affairs within its own defined territory and effectively participate in the central government on the basis of freedom, and fair and proper representation;
- c.) Exercise its right to self-determination of [*sic*] independence, when the concerned nation/nationality or people is convinced that the above rights are denied, abridged or abrogated.

Note that Article 2c sets a substantive condition for the exercise of the right to secession, namely, that the ethnic group (“nation/nationality or people”) perceive that its rights have been “denied, abridged or abrogated.”

The TPLF and EPRDF insisted that the secession clause be included in the charter. Had it not been included, the OLF would not have joined the Transitional Government of Ethiopia and the country would probably have once more relapsed into civil war. All of the Somali parties required the clause as a condition of their participation, and the Afar parties made

⁴⁹For a list of the groups, see Aaron Tesfaye, *Political Power and Multiethnic Federalism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), p. 75. Some of the groups were created overnight on the eve of the conference.

⁵⁰“Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia,” (Addis Ababa, 22 July 1991), p. 1.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

⁵²The words “nation, nationality, or people” were defined in Article 39, Section 5 (see below), but their differentiation from each other has not been stated in any official document. It can be assumed that the three words denote a hierarchy of ethnic groups from large (“nation”) through medium (“nationality”) to small (“people”) in both numerical size and political significance. For example, the Oromo are a nation, the Agew/Kamyr are a nationality, and the Koma are a people.

the same demands. The Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE)—the defunct party of Mengistu Haile Mariam, who fled the country—was against the secession clause but was blocked from participating in the charter conference. Many elite members of the previously dominant Amhara ethnic group were opposed to the secession clause. The late Professor Asrat Woldeyes, a well-known surgeon, articulated their opposition during the conference to draft the transition charter.⁵³ Other pan-Ethiopianists, including elite members of minority groups in the south, were also against the secession clause but did not have any chance of prevailing against the EPRDF. Among scholars, Samuel Assefa raised the most reasoned objection in two articles, the second of which he presented at a constitutional symposium in Addis Ababa in 1993.⁵⁴

The charter conference established an eighty-seven-member Council of Representatives comprising “representatives of national liberation movements, other political organizations and prominent individuals” (Article 7). The Council of Representatives acted as the national parliament for the two-and-a-half-year transition period. The EPRDF had the largest voting bloc, with thirty-two seats, followed by the OLF with twelve seats.⁵⁵ The radical departure from the unitary policies of the two previous regimes provoked immediate opposition from pan-Ethiopian nationalists. At the other extreme, the OLF bolted out of the transitional government in June 1992 and abandoned its participation in the upcoming district and regional elections, charging election fraud and complaining that the ethnic dispensation embodied in the Constitution was not genuine.⁵⁶ In April 1993, the EPRDF ousted five southern political groups from the Council of Representatives. By the time the Constitution came into force in 1995, some ethnic organizations were opposed to the EPRDF's federal design and frustrated its efforts to build political legitimacy for multiethnic federalism.⁵⁷

The 1995 Constitution and the Secession Clause

The transitional Council of Representatives established a Constitutional Commission to draft a constitution in 1992. It later debated the draft extensively. The most controversial issue in the twelve-day debate was the

⁵³Asrat Woldeyes represented the university at the charter conference and came to symbolize this opposition. Subsequently, he founded the All-Amhara People's Organization.

⁵⁴Samuel Assefa, “Of Federalism and Secession,” *Constitutionalism: Reflections and Recommendations, The Symposium on the Making of the New Ethiopian Constitution* (Addis Ababa: InterAfrica Group, 1993), pp. 113–125.

⁵⁵No explicit reason was given for the seat allocations. They probably reflected the relative military and political strength of the attending parties.

⁵⁶See National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, *An Evaluation of the June 21, 1992 Elections in Ethiopia* (Washington, DC: National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 1992); Leenco Lata, *The Ethiopian State at the Crossroads: Decolonization & Democracy or Disintegration?* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1999).

⁵⁷Lata charges that “the process has in fact now ended in the restoration of a Dergue-like one-party regime instead of the pluralist democratic order that was originally envisaged,” *ibid.*, xiii.

right of secession. The minority position argued against the right-of-secession clause on the ground that Ethiopia is not a colonial empire and that the dividing line is class rather than ethnicity. One of the major articulators of the minority position against the secession clause during the debate was a (minority) southerner, Haile Wolde Michael, who charged that not only the Amhara and the Tigraway, but also the Oromo, have been oppressors of minorities.⁵⁸ The majority position was articulated by Meles Zenawi (then president, now prime minister), who gave four reasons for multiethnic federalism: (1) “nations, peoples and nationalities are sovereign”; (2) “one of the basic tenets of democracy is the belief that people can decide on what is advantageous to them”; (3) “secession should be supported for the sake of peace and stability”; and (4) “we support the idea for the sake of voluntary union.”⁵⁹

The majority position on the right-to-secession clause was endorsed overwhelmingly by the Council of Representatives. After adopting the draft in 1994, the council presented it for public discussion. Although Meles Zenawi was an ardent advocate of the majority position, significantly he suggested that both majority and minority positions on all clauses, including the contentious secession clause, be presented for public discussion. The draft constitution was discussed publicly in urban neighborhood and peasant associations throughout the country during summer 1994. Then, an elected Constituent Assembly, which was mostly composed of EPRDF partisans, ratified the federal constitution in December 1994; it came into force in August 1995.

The Constitution starts with the words: “We the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia.” It assigns sovereignty to the ethnic groups constituting Ethiopia. Article 8 reads, “All sovereign power resides in the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia.” Although Ethiopia is a multiethnic state, the preamble affirms that the Ethiopian peoples, “in full and free exercise of [their] right to self-determination,” strongly commit themselves to build “one political community” and “one economic community” based on their “common interests, common outlook and common destiny.” These clauses were inserted into the preamble, after a long debate, in order to underscore the need for political and economic unity among the constituent ethnic groups and regional states.⁶⁰ The preamble also affirms “full respect of individual . . . freedoms and rights.”

In short, a secession clause was placed in the Constitution because the major forces (the TPLF and the EPRDF) that overthrew the military government and other important organizations such as the OLF, Somali

⁵⁸Constitutional Commission of the Transitional Government, “Debate on the Draft Constitution,” 5.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 5–6.

⁶⁰Interview with Kifle Wodajo, Chairman of the Constitutional Commission, July 2001.

parties, and Afar parties had inscribed the right to self-determination in their political programs and objectives. The new rulers believed that they could not maintain Ethiopia as one sovereign state if they did not include a secession clause. A few members of the Constitutional Commission, including its chairman, objected to the secession clause, but the overwhelming majority supported it. In fact, the condition for the exercise of the right to secession that existed in the transition charter (see Article 2c above) was removed from the Constitution (see Article 39 below), thus implying rather broad grounds for secession. Article 39, “Rights of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples,” stipulates the following:

1. Every Nation, Nationality and People shall have the unrestricted right to self-determination up to secession.
2. Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history.
3. Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to a full measure of self-government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation in State and Federal governments.
4. The right to self-determination, including secession, of every Nation, Nationality and People shall come into effect:
 - a) When a demand for secession has been approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of the legislative council of the Nation, Nationality or People concerned;
 - b) When the Federal Government has organized a referendum which must take place within three years from the time it received the concerned council’s decision for secession;
 - c) When the demand for secession is supported by a majority vote in the [regional] referendum;
 - d) When the Federal Government will have transferred its powers to the Council of the Nation, Nationality or People who has voted to secede; and
 - e) When the division of assets is effected in a manner prescribed by law.
5. A “Nation, Nationality or People” for the purpose of this Constitution, is 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 who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory.

Article 39 imposes no substantive condition, unlike Article 2c of the transition charter.⁶¹ It simply establishes procedures for the exercise of the right to secession: (1) a two-thirds majority of the legislative council of

⁶¹In the constitution drafting process, commission chairman Kifle Wodajo pointed out that an ethnic group could desire secession for reasons other than those identified in the transition charter, for example, economic reasons. Ironically, this point perhaps contributed to the removal from the draft constitution of the conditionality provision that was in the charter.

the concerned ethnic group (“nation, nationality or people”) puts a referendum on secession on the agenda (Article 39.4a), (2) the federal government is then required to organize a referendum within three years of the concerned legislative council’s decision (Article 39.4b), and (3) only a simple majority vote of the demanding ethnic group is required to effect secession (Article 39.4c).

Even though any ethnic group has, in principle, a right to secede, the exercise of this right is most unlikely, especially for small or medium-sized ethnic groups. For example, in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples (SNNP) regional states, where there are forty-six ethnic groups, it is improbable that any one of them could find secession a viable option. For this reason, a fairly large ethnic group has an incentive to seek a status as a regional state. Article 47.2 allows the creation of additional regional states: “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples within the States . . . have the right to establish, at any time, their own States.” Article 47.3 lays down the procedures for formation of a new regional state:

- a) When the demand for statehood has been approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Council of the Nation, Nationality or People concerned, and the demand is presented in writing to the State Council [regional state legislature];
- b) When the Council that received the demand has organized a referendum within one year to be held in the Nation, Nationality or People that made the demand;
- c) When the demand for statehood is supported by a majority vote in the referendum;
- d) When the State Council will have transferred the powers to the Nation, Nationality or People that made the demand;
- e) When the new State created by the referendum without any need for application becomes a member of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

Nonetheless, if an ethnic group is dispersed among a number of regional states, it is unlikely to be able to exercise its right to secession. For example, the Yem ethnic group has a special district of its own within the SNNP regional state. But many members of the Yem ethnic group are dispersed in eight districts in the adjoining Oromia regional state, to which they were attracted by more fertile land and better economic opportunities. It would be unrealistic for this group to exercise its right to secession. It is relatively more realistic for an ethnic group to secede from one regional state and join another one. Within a regional state, there are *ketenas* (“zones”), and under zones, there are *woredas* (districts). An ethnic group could demand to be transferred from one district to another district or from one zone to another zone. It could also seek to upgrade itself from one tier to another (e.g., from district to zone or from zone to regional state). The same referendum procedure would be followed for such a change.

The secession clause has a symbolic value, but it is unlikely that any regional state or ethnic group will actually be permitted to secede from Ethiopia. Federal soldiers and police regularly take measures against ethnic organizations fighting for secession. Currently, for example, the national government is battling armed combatants of the OLF who are apparently bent on secession. In any event, the clause has not been tested thus far, but its symbolic value cannot be underestimated. Ethnic groups in border regional states (e.g., Somali) consider the secession clause to be a necessary condition for their continued membership in the Ethiopian state. During debates leading up to the 2000 elections, all parties in the Somali regional state, including the one allied to the EPRDF, attributed their participation to the existence of the secession clause.

The Constitution affirms the unrestricted corporate right of all ethnic groups. The phrase “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” assumes preexisting and mandate-giving entities. This right cannot be suspended even if a federal state of emergency were to be declared (Article 93.4c). No fundamental rights and freedoms provided in the Constitution, including the right of secession, can be amended except by a majority vote in *all* regional parliaments, a two-thirds vote of the House of Peoples’ Representatives, and a two-thirds vote of the House of Federation (Article 105). Secession does not require the approval of the federal House of Peoples’ Representatives, even though the federal government organizes the referendum. During the three-year “cooling-off” period, the federal government and other regional governments are free to urge and seek alternative resolution of the problem. Failing such a resolution, however, the federal government cannot go beyond the three-year period in carrying out the referendum in the seceding regional state or ethnic group. The House of Federation has the constitutional authority to ensure that the referendum is carried out in good faith: “It shall decide, in accordance with the Constitution, on issues relating to the right of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples to self-determination, including the right to secession” (Article 62.3). The federal government cannot refuse to organize a secession referendum, but it can make a case for a resolution short of secession during the three-year “cooling-off” period. There is no practical guarantee that it would not rig the referendum, although the House of Federation is expected to look after the interests of ethnic groups. In all probability, it would be the federal government that would phrase the referendum question as it is the institution charged with organizing the referendum.

The House of Federation

The House of Federation was created with the secession clause in mind and was designed to safeguard ethnic self-determination. This house (upper house) is “composed of representatives of Nations, Nationalities

and Peoples” (Article 61.1). It is the house of ethnic groups, not regional states. The House of Federation has two unique features: (1) it safeguards the rights of “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” and (2) it interprets the Constitution. “This . . . represents a complete departure from known practices and is a new model for ensuring unity and equality between the nations, nationalities and peoples in the Federation.”⁶² The Constitution (Articles 82–84) establishes the Council of Constitutional Inquiry, which investigates constitutional disputes and submits recommendations to the House for final decision. The House of Federation oversees the work of the Council of Constitutional Inquiry.

In terms of ethnic representation, the House of Federation is the most important national institution. Article 61.2 states, “Each Nation, Nationality and People shall be represented by at least one member.” There is also one additional representative for every 1 million population of each ethnic group. But there are some anomalies. First, although the total number of ethnic groups in the country is seventy-nine, according to the latest (1994) census, only sixty-seven ethnic groups are represented in the House of Federation. This means a dozen ethnic groups, small in size but not necessarily the smallest, are not represented in the House of Federation. The smallest ethnic group represented is the 1,526-strong Koma.⁶³ There are somewhat larger ethnic groups that are not represented in the House of Federation. Second, from Oromia, only the Oromo are represented in the House of Federation, although there are a few million non-Oromo inhabitants in Oromia. Third, the number of Oromo and Amhara is much greater than the number of Harari in the Harari regional state. Yet only the Harari ethnic group in the state is represented in the House of Federation. I am not aware of any explanations for such anomalies. These are sources of disillusionment for the unrepresented ethnic groups.

Members of the House of Federation are elected by the regional parliaments or through direct regional elections (Article 61.3). The House of Federation is assigned the role of safeguarding the interests of all “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” and is designed to be the guardian of the Constitution. It has the power to interpret the Constitution, establish the Council of Constitutional Inquiry, decide issues relating to secession, resolve interregional state disputes, resolve disputes between the federal government and regional states, decide the division of revenues between federal and regional governments, and order federal intervention if any region contravenes and thus endangers the constitutional structure. It is not a legislative body. It is the house of parliament in which the “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” (i.e., ethnic groups) are said to be directly and

⁶²Constitutional Commission of the Transitional Government, “The Council of the Federation,” *Transitional Government of Ethiopia Constitutional Commission Newsletter* 12 (December 1994), p. 1.

⁶³Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Central Statistical Authority, *1994 Population and Housing Census*, p. 42.

proportionately represented. The SNNP regional state, with forty-six ethnic groups, has fifty-four representatives. The two largest ethnic groups, the Oromo and the Amhara, have nineteen and seventeen representatives, respectively; the politically dominant ethnic group, the Tigraway, has three representatives. It is noteworthy that the multiethnic federal territories of Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa have no representation in the House of Federation. The two are directly answerable to the federal government. Because no specific ethnic communities inhabit them, they are deemed to have no right of ethnic representation. However, their inhabitants, like all citizens, are represented in the House of Representatives, in addition to their respective city councils.⁶⁴

State-Federal Relations

The Constitution provides considerable executive, legislative, and judicial authority to regional states. “All powers not given expressly to the Federal Government alone, or concurrently to the Federal government and the States are reserved to the States” (Article 52.1). Each of the nine regional states has its own constitution, flag, executive government, legislature, judiciary, police, and people’s militia; each chooses its own working language; finally, each has the right to secession. The Constitution also allows further decentralization from a regional state to its *ketena* and *woreda* governments. Some zones want their status upgraded to that of regional state, primarily because that is where executive power lies. Under “Political Objectives” (Article 88), the Constitution declares that the “Government shall promote and support the People’s self-rule at all levels.” State constitutions are expected “to be promulgated in conformity with” the federal Constitution (Article 93.1b).

Generally, the federal government mediates relations among regional states. Relations between the federal and regional governments and among regional governments have been relatively smooth thus far because a multiethnic ruling coalition and its allied ethnic parties have enjoyed a monopoly of power at all levels of government, except in one zone (Hadiya). The ruling coalition, the EPRDF, consists of three ethnic organizations and one multiethnic organization, namely, the TPLF, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO), and the Southern Ethiopia People’s Democratic Front (SEPDF). The EPRDF has hegemony over allied ruling

⁶⁴The House of Peoples’ Representatives (lower house) is “the highest authority of the Federal Government” (Article 50.3). Members of the federal House of Representatives are elected by constituents as citizens (not ethnic members) “for a term of five years on the basis of universal suffrage and by direct, free and fair elections held by secret ballot” (Article 54.1) on the basis of population size. For example, an Oromo in the Amhara regional state will vote for candidates for the federal (or regional state) parliament regardless of the candidates’ ethnic membership. He or she will not vote in the Oromia regional state in absentia. The total number of representatives cannot exceed 550. The party or parties that make up the majority of the lower house will form the government (Article 56).

parties in the remaining five regional states of the country, namely, the Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Harari, and Somali regional states. In practice, the dominance of the EPRDF limits political pluralism and puts in question the viability of multiethnic federalism.

CONCLUSION

The multiethnic federalism of Ethiopia is fraught with dangers and fears. A strong minority sees it, especially its secession clause, as a recipe for the breakup of Ethiopia. Although there is no evidence that new ethnic nationalisms have emerged as a consequence of multiethnic federalism, as they did in the former USSR, it is too early to dismiss their emergence entirely. For de-ethnicized Ethiopians and the offspring of inter-ethnic marriages, the imposition of ascribed ethnic classification, in the wake of multiethnic federalism, raises issues of identity and citizenship. The dominance of the Tigraway ethnic group in the EPRDF has led to a lack of ethnic pluralism. The political praxis of the TPLF and EPRDF has contributed to a blurring of the distinction between party and government and between the structure (i.e., the constitutionally based structures such as the House of Federation) and the actual practice of government. The style of government appears to be authoritarian, lacking liberal democratic practice.

Since 2001, the EPRDF has undergone an organizational and ideological crisis. In a series of party meetings in June 2001, the OPDO and the SEPDP, as well as the five allied regional parties, complained publicly of TPLF/EPRDF "tutelage." The EPRDF's crisis was manifested in its employment of Leninist organizational practices while espousing pluralist principles. The crisis has abated for now. But the EPRDF might yet face a great challenge in sustaining the multiethnic federal project unless it undergoes ideological and organizational changes, that is, makes a paradigm shift from democratic centralism to liberal democracy without severely undermining the integrity and political management of the federal structure.

M. A. M. Salih and John Markakis⁶⁵ see decentralization in Ethiopia as a way to foster democratization inasmuch as it enables more people to influence the political process. This is problematic, however, because the EPRDF authors of decentralization are also wedded to the modus operandi of democratic centralism. EPRDF cadres' violation of the voting rights of citizens in the Hadiya zone of the SNNP regional state in the 2000 elections has been well documented.⁶⁶ Given "democratic centralist" practices,

⁶⁵Salih and Markakis, *Ethnicity and the State*, p. 8.

⁶⁶Despite EPRDF cadres' rigging, intimidation, and violence, the HNDO (Hadiya National Democratic Organization) became the first opposition party ever to win an election in an ethnic zone over the ruling party. See Kjetil Tronvoll, "Voting, Violence and Violations: Peasant Voices on the Flawed Elections in Hadiya, Southern Ethiopia," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 39 (2001): 697-716.

democratization would be extremely difficult to realize, despite the principles of political pluralism enshrined in the Constitution. There is a mismatch between the democratic pluralist elements of the Constitution and the Leninist political praxis of the dominant party, not to mention the authoritarian political culture of the society. Daniel J. Elazar defines federation as “self-rule plus shared rule.”⁶⁷ Both self-rule and shared rule are practically impossible to actualize under democratic centralism. From the vantage point of Elazar’s “federal principles,” the challenges to multiethnic federalism are daunting indeed. The continued presence of secessionist movements in Oromia despite the secession clause, and the formation of the All-Amhara People’s Organization because of the secession clause, portend ill for multiethnic federalism and also indicate skepticism about the EPRDF’s good faith. Incomplete representation of small ethnic groups in the House of Federation denotes representational inequity.

Yet multiethnic federalism is a bold experiment with wide implications for the theory of federalism. Its distinguishing feature is its provision for the right of secession. A second major feature is the creation of a House of Federation to represent not regional states but the sovereign ethnic groups that voluntarily constituted the federation. A third significant feature is the constitutional role of the House of Federation. Whereas most federal constitutions assign the interpretation of the constitution to a supreme court (e.g., the United States) or a constitutional court (e.g., Germany), the Ethiopian one assigns it to the House of Federation. The rationale is to underscore the idea that the ethnic groups represented in the House are the final interpreters and upholders of the Constitution.

Multiethnic federalism has symbolic meaning for interethnic relations, and its impact is discernible in the willingness of ethnic groups in border areas to participate in the federal experiment. During the recent Ethio-Eritrean border war (1998–2000), individuals from all ethnic groups, including those in border regional states such as the Somali, Afar, and Gambella, volunteered in large numbers to join the war effort. Tragic as the conflict was, it nonetheless demonstrated a high degree of pan-Ethiopian nationalism among members of diverse ethnic backgrounds. The OLF was the conspicuous exception in aligning itself with Eritrea during the border war.

Multiethnic federalism has helped create conditions conducive to ethnic conflict, though not secession. Some ethnonationalist organizations seek secession, but they had sought secession even before the establishment of the federal system. Simply, multiethnic federalism has not dissuaded

⁶⁷Daniel J. Elazar, *Exploring Federalism* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1987), p. 12. “Self-rule” is mentioned in the Constitution only once (Article 88).

some of them from pursuing secession. The major organization advancing the cause of secession is the OLF. Nonetheless, some ethnic groups (e.g., the Somali) that ordinarily would not have supported the government appear to be hinging their support, alliance, and/or membership in the state structure on the basis of the secession provision. Multiethnic federalism has also afforded greater acknowledgment of ethnic egalitarianism, especially in the area of language and culture.

There are at least two measures that the ruling multiethnic coalition party, the EPRDF, could take to enhance the viability of Ethiopia's multiethnic federalism. First, its constituent ethnic parties could openly tolerate competing political parties in their respective regional states. Second, the EPRDF could open up its membership to other ethnic parties (e.g., Afar, Somali, Harari, and Benishangul-Gumuz) and to national and/or multiethnic parties, and it could do so on an equitable footing or proportional basis. There is now a suggestion that any citizen can join any of the EPRDF ethnic parties regardless of ethnic affiliation. For example, non-Oromo in Oromia could join the OPDO, non-Tigray in Tigray could join the TPLF, and non-Amhara in Amhara regional state could join the ANDM. In such an event, the direction would be toward a region-based (in contradistinction to an ethnic-based) federal system. There are also indications that the EPRDF might transform itself from a coalition of ethnic parties into a national (meta-ethnic) party of citizens. This last prospect might have serious ramifications for the ethnic basis of the federal system; in a nutshell, it would be likely to make the nation-state less federal and more unitary, perhaps a step closer to the Indian type of union-based federalism.

As indicated earlier, ideological orientation and political necessity led to multiethnic federalism as a framework for resolving issues of ethnic diversity and the right to self-determination. If this federal experiment fails, no one knows whether a nationwide consensus on some other form of federalism could be forged. A return to some form of unitary state would be improbable as many ethnic groups and regional states—notably Oromia, Afar, and Somali—would be likely to object vehemently to such an outcome. Alternatively, in the face of actual or perceived chaos, the military might again seize power. However, if the military itself fractures along ethnic lines, Ethiopians could witness a Yugoslavia-like scenario. All that can be concluded, provisionally, is that the viability of multiethnic federalism is indeterminate. Contingent events (such as whether there is equitable power sharing among ethnic groups, equitable revenue sharing between the federal and regional states, further democratization, and rapid economic and educational development) will shape the outcome of the multiethnic federal experiment. Much hinges on the ruling party's willingness and capacity to disengage itself from democratic centralism, extend and deepen democratization, reduce

poverty, ensure sustained economic growth, and expand access to education.

Thus far, multiethnic federalism has undercut the drive for secession by largely removing manifest aspects of ethnic oppression (e.g., language use) that would have rallied ethnonationalist organizations. The proclamation of ethnic autonomy has dampened grievances based on deprecation of denigrated languages and cultures. The multiethnic federal project has the potential to enhance interethnic harmony based on mutual respect and reciprocity. The stability of the infant political system is dependent on the EPRDF's flexibility and adaptability. The success of multiethnic federalism will be contingent, in good measure, on an expansion of power away from the numerically small Tigraway ethnic group more comprehensively to include the two largest groups, the Oromo and the Amhara. The major ethnic groups not only need to work out a mutual accommodation but also need to support pluralist policies and practices vis-à-vis all ethnic groups in the country.