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July 2011

# Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security

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## *Ethnicity, Ethnic Conflicts, and Secessionism in Ethiopian Politics*

Bezawit Beyene\*

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Since the colonial period, conflicts between ethnic groups have increased and the consequences have become more devastating, largely because colonial powers construed ethnic divisions and conflicts to further their own colonial interests, often dividing ethnic groups against each other. Ethiopia was the only African nation that was able to resist occupation by a colonial power and to maintain its sovereignty, hence ethnic conflict and competition in Ethiopia have had a different origin and aim than in other African countries. However, every political group and government which has taken power in Ethiopia has founded its power on ethnic grounds, and consequently, ethnic competition and conflict have been ever-present in Ethiopia.

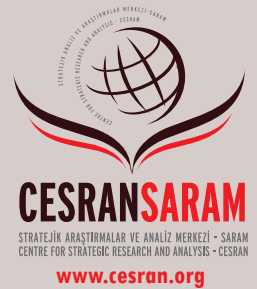
This article explores the causal dynamics of ethnic-based conflict and secession in Ethiopia. It attempts to identify the resulting socio-political conditions as well as political pitfalls in the country, and to propose alternative notions for a better state of affairs in the country.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, secessionism, ethno-nationalism, federalism, the Derg, Ethiopia, Somali.

*Bezawit Kefyalew*  
P.O.Box – 11300  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

*e-mail:* bezawitk@yahoo.com

\* Bezawit Beyene has a Masters of Arts Degree in Peace and Reconciliation with distinction, from Coventry University, UK, and a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Political Science and International Relations from Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. Bezawit's experience includes working for international organisations in the fields of development project management, coordination of care programs for refugees and displaced people, and leading local peacebuilding and reconciliation projects. Currently Bezawit is working on research programmes in Ethiopia on the issues of multi-dimensionally indexed poverty as well as gender-based violence. Bezawit hopes to pursue further academic studies on the impact and effects of ethnic rivalry and secessionism in Africa.



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Journal of Conflict  
Transformation & Security,  
Vol. 1, No. 2, 2011

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# Ethnicity, Ethnic Conflicts, and Secessionism in Ethiopian Politics

## Theoretical Overview

Ethnicity is one aspect of identity around which people organise themselves; it is often the core element by which people mobilize and seek political power. Harff and Gurr defined ethnic groups as 'psychological communities' whose members share a persisting sense of common interest and identity based on some combination of shared historical experience and valued cultural traits; beliefs, language, ways of life, or a common homeland (2004:3). Moreover, 'ethnicity is not a thing or a collective asset of a particular group; it is a social relation in which social actors perceive themselves and are perceived by others as being culturally distinct collectivities' (Malešević' 2004:4).

Ethnic groups and their characteristics are viewed in a number of different ways. For some scholars, ethnic groups have a certain characteristic unique to the group which is consistent and 'inherent', whereas for others, elements of the group character are 'mutable' and marked only when viewed in relation to other groups. However, it is important to understand that these characteristics are not always consistent and changes are almost inevitable. Solidarity within the group is strong, which creates the potential for the group to mobilise members around their shared ethnicity in order to protect common interests or needs.

The Human Needs Theory explains the causes of identity (ethnic) group mobilisation and conflict as the consequence of a failure to fulfil human developmental needs. John Burton and Edward Azar argued that 'protracted social conflicts' are caused when people are not able to acquire the means to meet their basic needs. Basic needs, as explained by Azar, include 'security, recognition and acceptance, fair access to political institutions and economic participation', in general referred to as developmental needs (1990:7-10).

Azar argues that individuals predominantly attempt to meet these developmental needs through the formation of identity groups, and that the rise of politically active identity groups stems from two sources. The first of these sources is colonial legacy, from the period when various European powers used the 'divide and rule' system, privileging certain groups over others. The second source is an historical pattern of rivalry and contest among communal actors. In this case, the capacity to fulfill human needs presupposes the ability to access political and economic power, which is thwarted if power is dominated by a single group or by a combination of groups which tends to discriminate against others. The inability to share power and ensure



equitable distribution is influenced by the acceptance or rejection of group identity (Azar 1990:7-10). In most instances dominant groups try to assimilate other groups by coercive means (Burton 1990:37).

When ethnicity is not managed through peace-oriented and democratic policies, it inherently involves and perpetuates conflict; notwithstanding that ethnicity is also a major cornerstone of social organisation. Ethnic politicization and conflict occur for various reasons, the major ones being economic, political, and cultural inequalities.

Harf and Gurr describe ethno-nationalist groups as 'relatively large and regionally concentrated ethnic groups that lie within the boundaries of one state or of several adjacent states; their modern political movements are directed towards achieving greater autonomy or independent statehood' (2004:23). Secession, 'is the formal withdrawal from membership of a polity by section. It is the attempt by an ethnic or regional group(s) to withdraw its region from the control of the state of which it is part' (Baker 1998:6). Most African countries in the post-independence era are facing rebellious tendencies from secessionist groups who in one way or another consider themselves different, marginalised from the existing system of governance and culturally discriminated against. Political secession is pursued either by groups who have no hope of achieving their political and economic interests (their developmental needs) within the existing state system, or by those who believe their national identity is totally distinct and would be better expressed through the existence of a separate state.

## Ethnic Politics and Secessionist Movements in Ethiopia

### *Historical Background*

The political history of Ethiopia is permeated with ethnic rivalry and conflict. Since the early dynasties, rulers descended only from certain ethnic groups, thus reinforcing the belief that they were the people chosen by God to lead the country. The Amhara dynasties in particular traced their origin from the Old Testament, claiming that the first king who founded the dynasty in the first century A.D was Menelik I, the son of King Solomon of Israel, and Queen of Sheba of Axum (Axum was the first dynastic state from which the later Abyssinian dynasties had their origin). This line of ancestry, sustained until 1974, received strong support from the Orthodox Christian Church, and the history of the Axumite and Amhara dynasties was glorified and used to give legitimacy to the ruling power.

Throughout the *Zemene Mesafinet* (Era of Princes) from 1769 to 1855, competition and conflict between the central power or emperor and the regional lords or princes was prevalent (Aalen 2002:2-3). Since this period, when control over central power was pursued by lords, sultans and chiefs organised along ethnic lines from different regions, Ethiopia has exhibited precisely such a pattern of rivalry and contest amongst key actors and, as Azar noted, this is one of the reasons for the emergence of ethnic-based political groups (1990:7).

The process of consolidating central power in Ethiopia was started by Emperor Tewdros II in 1855. His actions included reducing the power of regional Lords and establishing a



'national army'. Emperor Yohannes (1872 – 1889), who succeeded Emperor Tewdros II, tried to continue the centralization, but using different techniques. His approach could be described as 'controlled regionalism', but it failed to achieve its objective (Zewde 1991:44). It was during the reign of Emperor Menelik II (1889 – 1913) that Ethiopia assumed its current territorial boundaries.

Emperor Menelik II pursued an expansionist policy and undertook several military campaigns, subjugating and annexing the various ethnic groups and communities that occupied the southern and western parts of the country. Following this expansionist political movement, ethnic entities like the Oromo, the Wolaita, the Sidama, the Gurage and the Kafa, came under the rule of the central ruling power. However, the expansionism of Menelik II was subject to different theories and interpretations; some groups argue that the process was one of unification, while others consider it internal colonization (Aalen 2002:3). For example, the internal colonization argument was widely used by ethno-national groups such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). The subjective nature of these arguments, or 'rewriting' of history, is an inherent challenge, allowing nationalist groups to select the interpretations that facilitate political mobilisation and domination by one or more groups.

The proponents of the internal colonization argument cite evidence that the system applied by the expansionists was exploitative; allocating a different status to individuals based on their ethnic background. Central government representatives (Amhara), were dispatched throughout the country, and were referred to as *neftegna*, literally meaning 'bearers of guns,' by the groups under their control (Tronvoll 2000:12). Since the 1890s, the Abyssinian forces arrived with the aim to incorporate new areas by enforcing taxation and their system of governance. In some areas such as Welaita and Kefa, they were faced with resistance and they used violent measures to subjugate the people. They used cultural stereotypes, which regarded people in specific areas as 'backward' and 'pagan', in order to find grounds of justification for this domination.

The proponents of the unification theory, however, view the process as 'primarily an outcome of internal power struggles between Menelik and competing forces' (Aalen 2002:3). They consider Ethiopia a truly 'multi-ethnic national society' which emerged from centuries of interaction and acculturation between ethnic groups (ICG 2009:2). Other perspectives on Ethiopian history recognize the injustices and the domination of one group over others at various times, but view expansionism as a natural process of state formation.

Emperor Haile-Selassie (1930-1974) continued consolidating central power and nation building, which was strengthened by the introduction of a constitution. However, continued inequalities and injustice led to various peasant rebellions and the emergence of ethnically-based liberation movements in such areas as Eritria, Tigray, Oromiya, Sidama, and Ogaden (Alem 2004:100).

From 1855-1974, successive imperial rulers from Emperor Tewdros to Emperor Haile-Selassie, attempted to end ethnic political rivalries and to consolidate the rival constituencies under a central power dominated by the Amhara or Tigre ethnic groups.



They aimed for the 'cultural homogenization' of the country, which was achieved through the centralization of state power and a one language policy (Alem 2004:99). Rulers attempted to assimilate other ethnic groups into the Amhara culture whilst simultaneously rejecting the culture and identity of those groups.

The Derg, a Marxist military regime led by Mengestu Hailemaryam, took power in 1974, by overthrowing the imperial rule that had been feudal and had been characterized by economic and political inequalities and exploitation that favoured the dominant ethnic group and local lords. However, from taking power in 1974 until its overthrow in 1991, the Derg too continued to promote a centralised unitary state. The new regime maintained the one language (Amharic) policy and changed little of the feudal nature of the previous regime (Firebrace 1983:17).

However, the imposition of the Amharic language could not be tolerated by other ethnic constituencies; language was believed to be a key factor of identity and valued as an essential means of cultural preservation and political participation. Moreover, the Marxist rule of the Derg used a number of more coercive policies, which led to the emergence and growth of different ethnically-based political groups, such as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) to rise up against the military regime (Tronvoll 2000:14).

### ***Ethnic-Based Political Powers and Secessionist Movements***

Prior to the military regime, successive rulers had been deaf to the demands of different ethnic nationalities. Most rulers pursued a united Ethiopia slogan without recognising the rights and cultures of different ethnic groups, a policy which led to the growth of ethnic-based political groups. Demands by these groups were made in response to coercive treatment by central government, and some began their struggle during Emperor Haile Selassie's rule.

The Eritrean liberation movement for independence from Ethiopia (1961-1991) was distinct from that of other ethnic groups in Ethiopia, because of Eritrea's earlier experience of colonisation by Italy. The inability of successive Ethiopian governments to recognize the unique identity and needs of the Eritreans contributed to their decision to secure their identity through the establishment of a separate state. Factors such as ethnic dominance by central government, inability to exercise political power, and cultural and economic underdevelopment were significant in the struggle against successive Ethiopian governments.

The Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which has been in power since 1991, ruling under the umbrella of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), was itself the product of ethnic grievance against Amhara dominion. The Tigrean people expressed their discontent with the governing system as well as with the unfair taxation by the emperor and their own 'feudal lords', in the Wayyane rebellion of 1943 (Firebrace 1983:17). The TPLF began armed struggle in 1975, with the objective of 'self-determination' by Tigreans. A major factor in the emergence of the TPLF movement was their exclusion from power. Therefore, having experienced



political alienation, the TPLF recognised the concerns of other ethno-national groups, and proposed the establishment of a federal system that would address these problems within Ethiopia.

### ***The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)***

The OLF began its quest for self-rule during the military regime and is still seeking independence for the Oromo people. The Oromo people form one of the largest ethnic groups in Ethiopia with a population of around seventeen million across approximately 600,000 square kilometres. The Oromo liberation movement grew out of the Mecha-Tulema Self-Help Association in 1973, which developed a political awareness of the unequal relationship between the Oromo people and the Abyssinian people, in terms of economic, political and cultural rights. This grievance became the motivation for the Oromo to organise themselves politically.

The OLF had been fighting against central ruling governments since the Derg, including since the 1980s, in alliance with the TPLF. This alliance enabled the OLF to consider an alternative option to that of separation from the Ethiopian state, namely participation in the Transitional Government of Ethiopia after the defeat of the Derg in 1991. This lasted for a brief period during which the OLF promoted Oromo culture and the use of the Latin alphabet in the Oromo region within the educational system. However, the alliance was short-lived after disagreements began to emerge over the system of governance and the upcoming election in 1992. The group again returned to its original objective of an independent Oromia, to which the government responded with persecution and mass arrest.

The current system of ethnic federalism has failed to win the hearts of the majority of the Oromo people. The system reorganized the country into ethnically-divided federal regions that placed power-sharing at its core. However, with power concentrated at central government level, in which one ethnic group (the Tigre) established its predominance, the right of the Oromo to govern their own state is limited. As the largest ethnic group in the country, the Oromo pose the greatest threat to the federal government. The Oromo criticize the current government system as deceptive, superficial and exploitative, in a sense similar to the earlier, oppressive Abyssinian powers. The government, in its so-called fight against 'illegal political groups,' has also subjected many individuals to repressive action that resulted in large-scale imprisonment, killing and exile.

### ***The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF)***

The Ogaden clan is one of the dominant ethnic Somali groups that inhabit the eastern lowland part of Ethiopia. It is the second major group with a distinct identity, and it maintains a long-standing feud with the central rulers (ICG 2009:27). The ONLF began with irredentist objectives (the belief of an ethnic group that it belongs not where it presently is but to the 'mother country' to which it aspires to return, in this case to the Republic of Somalia); however, it has come to limit its objective to the right of Ogadens to self-determination and self-rule.



During the early years after the Derg took power from imperial rule, Somalis in the Ogaden area tried to use the instability to further their aim of joining the Republic of Somalia (Lewis 1988:574). During the Ogaden War (1977—1978), the West Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) was the prominent group fighting against Ethiopian military forces with support from the Republic of Somalia (Møller 2009:9). After the defeat of the WSLF by the Ethiopian military force, the group disintegrated and the ONLF was established by members of the WSLF, maintaining wider support and challenging the EPRDF's power since 1994.

Until 1992, Somalis in Ethiopia had never held positions in central government. The Ogaden region is politically neglected and economically under-developed, a policy which was in part designed to prevent the establishment of a base that could provide economic and human resources for ethno-nationalist groups, many of whom identify themselves more with Somalia than with Ethiopia.

The ONLF still 'seeks an independent Ogadenia, and controls much of the rural hinterlands of the Fiq, Degehabur, Qorahe, Wardheer and Godey zones, which are predominantly inhabited by Ogaden clans of the Darood clan family' (ICG 2009:28). Since 1992, the Somali regional government was established with parliamentary representation in the central government. However, the Somali ethnic group remain dissatisfied by the current government system and as the result, the region has been one of the major areas of instability in the country. For instance, the region twice experienced a change of regional leaders and executives within two years after the establishment of the transitional government in 1991.

In 1992, most representatives of the Somali regional parliament were ONLF members. This group was replaced in 1993 by appointed parliamentarians who again did not last long after they began accusing the federal government of interference in the internal affairs of the region. They voted for secession, a move that led to a severe deterioration in the relationship between the ONLF and the federal government (Markakis 1996:568). ONLF insurgency continued during this period with bomb attacks on hotels, market places, schools and other public areas in Ogaden, the region's capital. The government's response was to use violence and collective punishment, further alienating Ethiopian Somalis (ICG 2009:28).

### **The Existing Political and Governance System**

The current EPRDF government comprising a range of different ethnic-based political parties, came to power in 1991, by defeating the Derg regime. With a history of struggle based on ethnic grievances, the EPRDF was committed to recognise the rights of each national or ethnic group in order to address political, economic and cultural inequalities between the different groups in Ethiopia. However, this involved adopting a radical approach.

The EPRDF introduced controversial and contentious policies, including the 'acceptance of Eritrean independence and the reversal of the age-old quest of Ethiopian rulers to centralise state and integrate a population belonging to more than eighty ethnic groups or nationalities' (Young 1996:531). In 1995, the EPRDF formed a federal





republic state, the constituents being ethnically-divided regional states, as a measure that was deemed to be in recognition of and an answer to the quests of ethnic constituencies, nations and nationalities. Moreover, the 1994 Constitution ratified the UN Declaration of Human Rights and, most importantly, granted the right of nations to self-determination up to secession in what was a fundamental turning point for Ethiopian politics. The EPRDF also appeared to be supportive of a multi-party political system.

Within this structure, every ethnic group was granted 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' (Art 39.2). Furthermore, the constitution ratified 'the right to a full measure of self-government that includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation in state and federal governments' (Art 39.3). Enabling groups to preserve 'their cultural and consensus values' is vital and is a stepping stone to 'long term integration'; thus the move made by the EPRDF government to recognize and support identity groups is vital (Burton 1990:140).

The positive benefits of ethnic-based federalism as a system of governance and the ratification of 'self-determination up to secession' are contested by different groups. However, advocates of ethnic-based federalism assert that it is the glue that enables multi-ethnic Ethiopia to remain unified with territorial integrity, and the federal system has been promoted as one that could allow and enable the different ethnic groups to govern their own affairs. This form of federalism has also been welcomed by many as the only remedy for 'historic injustice' (ICG 2009:23), and as the best way to ensure political stability in the country by creating sufficient political space for the public at large and for multiple parties and organizations established along ethnic or non-ethnic political lines.

The other important factor of support for the current form of governance, is the recognition it gives to the rights of ethnic groups to preserve their culture and develop their languages. For instance, students in the education system can learn in their own language using curricula that enables children to acquire knowledge of their culture and history. The regions' official languages have become the respective native languages of the regions' peoples; there has been visible improvement in service delivery and access to the state at local levels, and the struggle of people for their cultural development has gained better support (ICG 2009:17, 24).

However, from the start, some groups have condemned this form of federalism as designed to weaken national feelings and ultimately to fragment the country. These groups have directed their accusations most specifically at the TPLF, a minority group that still manages to dominate the government. The TPLF is accused of using this divisive system as a malicious means to maintain their power. Furthermore, there have been some groups who consider that '... the new regional state boundaries lack historical validity and needlessly endanger the survival of the Ethiopian state' (Alem 2004:99). It is clear that the government still continues to face challenges with regard to inter-ethnic relations, boundary demarcation, regional cooperation, and lack of legitimacy of the central government.



## Current Political Pitfalls in Ethiopia

### *Centralisation of Power*

The current form of federal governance has for the most part failed to achieve the promised results with regard to ensuring an equitable power distribution, peace and stability. For instance, the International Crisis Group (ICG) observed, 'Constitutionally, Ethiopia is a federal polity, but its federal entities are controlled by the strongly centralised EPRDF that predetermines decisions from the prime minister's palace in the capital to remote rural kebelles' (2009: 15) .

The major drawback with the current federal system, therefore, is that power is not actually de-centralised. Although in principle, the prime objective in adopting federalism is to enable and empower national constituencies for self-governance by diffusing power and decision-making downward to local levels and to avert ethnic conflicts, nonetheless the regional governments appear to be mere functionalities that implement federal policies and laws rather than represent and defend the interests of the people of their respective regions. One can therefore, assert that the Ethiopian political system cannot be considered as truly federal, because of the nominal position the regional states have within the political arena.

### *Discrimination by the Government*

The political history of the country provides adequate ground for truth in the hypothesis that the control of state power by a single ethnic group, or by a combination of ethnic groups, leads to emergence of grievance, dissatisfaction, rivalry, and conflict between ethnic constituencies, and ultimately to unrest and disorder in the nation. In the case of the current political system, it seems that history is repeating itself. Constitutionally, all regional states are equal and the representation of all 'nations and nationalities' is guaranteed. Ensuring equality in this sense presupposes that the state mechanism is impartial. Yet the impartiality of the present state is called into question: 'TPLF having fought seventeen years of war against the Derg, assumed the 'right' to more and even 'lifelong' power (Gebreselassie 2003:21).

At regional levels, too, the impartiality of state bodies has been questioned, because in regions with diverse ethnic populations, dominant or majority ethnic groups have political, socio-cultural and economic advantages and dominion over the smaller groups. For example, minority groups are forced by the system and its internal dynamics to adopt the language and cultural elements of dominant groups, thereby acknowledging their power over the smaller groups. It has also been contested that in a country such as Ethiopia, factors like labour migration and mixed parenthood will make 'simplistic delineation between ethnicity and territory' complicated, moreover that the domination of one ethnic group over others produces 'new minorities' in such regional states (ICG 2009:23).

The existing dynamics within regions have negatively affected 'settlers' from different ethnic backgrounds and regions; the conflict in Assosa in 2000 is an evidence for this, where ethnic Amhara, Oromo and Berta were attacked by the indigenous people of



the region. Sometimes such conflicts have taken on the character of ethnic cleansing; 'non-natives' have been chased away in Arussi, Harar and Bale (ICG 2009:24). However, inappropriate courses of action appear to substitute for effective solutions; at the national level political leaders advocate heterogeneity, and yet simultaneously at regional level they insist on homogeneity.

Moreover, the Amhara ethnic group have faced discrimination from the TPLF and other ethnic groups who saw them as the allied oppressor of previous governments. Amhara were expelled from important positions in the bureaucracy and from various regions, especially Oromiya (Young 1996:536; Teshome 2009:63). These actions were seen as the dawn of another ethnic domination in Ethiopia and as sowing the seeds of further ethnic tension. The 2005 election revealed latent ethnic tensions when the government and political parties each described the other as a threat to the well-being and security of another particular ethnic group.

### ***Ongoing Ethnic Conflicts***

Various ethnic conflicts have occurred among the constituencies of the country's federal system over the last two decades. Most conflicts have not arisen from the existence of irreconcilable ethnic differences, but from competition over state resources:

Ethnic conflicts have not disappeared but have been either transferred from the national to the regional, district and kebele levels or have been contained by the security forces. Relations between ethnic groups have become increasingly competitive, as they vie for control of administrative boundaries and government budgets in addition to land and natural resources. (ICG 2009:25).

Mere recognition of ethnic identities and promoting the values of different groups will not end ethnic competition and conflict, unless the developmental needs of all ethnic groups are met in an equitable and just manner. Although the current government has been promising a lasting answer to the problem, it has very clear that an equitable distribution of resources has not been realised, particularly when government-sponsored parties use regional resource bases more and more to satisfy their patronage. These have given rise to arguments and conflict right from national parliament level to the lowest localities.

On the other hand, demarcating the regional state between different ethnic groups has proved a challenge for the federal government. Conflicting claims between groups over border areas have led to antagonistic relations in various regions. In 1998, the Guji Oromo and the Gedeo fought each other over Hagere Mariam town. Again in 2006, the Guji Oromo and the Boran Oromo engaged in repeated clashes that included killing, property damage, and displacement (ICG 2009:25).

The ICG has observed that local politicians and even higher officials of regions have at times incited conflicts between their people and the members of neighbour regions, often due to competition over 'administrative power, land, tax revenue and, potentially, food aid' (ICG 2009: 24 – 26).



### ***Ethnicity versus Citizenship***

The division of the federal constituencies of a country into regions and administrative sections along ethnic lines tends to hinder shared and strong national sentiment. The EPRDF's attempt to enable groups to maintain and develop their identity was seen as a middle ground between the two options, i.e. between the imposition of a 'homogeneous' identity, and accepting the demands of secessionist groups. However, the ethnic federal system has encouraged a high level of loyalty by Ethiopians to their own ethnic groups, to the extent that it restricts cooperation and hinders the concept of a shared future. The division of the country along ethnic lines gives much emphasis to the separate identity, leaving less room for 'shared national goals' (Berhe 2008:31).

Gebreselassie has noted that 'without national unity, so essential to political stability, it is impossible for constitutionalism to take root' (2003:32). If adequate emphasis is not given to the enhancement and maintenance of shared national identity, adoption of ethnic-based federalism is more likely to lead to instability and disintegration. In line with this view, the case of Ethiopian federalism seems to have scored less success than it promised and currently faces a gloomy prospect for the future in terms of national cohesion.

### ***Distribution of Economic Power***

Economic power is vital to the exercise of political power. However, the regional states that constitute the current Ethiopian federal state are economically weak; this constitutes one of the major factors that has made them dependent on central government, and inadequate in active self-governance. In many instances, conflicts between ethnic groups have had their origin in a regional need to gain a stronger economic position, and this need has translated into rivalry and conflict over land, population, tax revenue, and resources such as forests and rivers.

Although most regions have recorded improved economic growth, the perception of inequitable distribution of resources has the capacity to cause ethnic conflict. Economic development is also affected by the positions of exclusivity held by regional state elites. The regional elites decide on the

...distribution and control of economic assets including land, capital, credit, and licenses to operate commercial and financial enterprises so as to benefit their own ethnic constituents. In the process, market rules of competition are either superseded or otherwise manipulated, with the result that members of other ethnic communities are excluded from participation in the local economy (Gebreselassie 2003: 34).

### ***Secession as a Solution***

There are two major forces, the ONLF and the OLF, which have been active in Ethiopia with the objective of total separation or secession from the country. These forces have been in opposition to the current government system as they perceive it to be entirely similar to the old, undemocratic, and oppressive governments that ruled the country previously.



Both the ONLF as well as the OLF have engaged in brutal military actions, although the government's response was no better. The ONLF organized and carried out bombings of market places, hotels, buses and trains, in which the only victims were civilians. From their side, the OLF massacred civilians and members of the Ethiopian military forces on various occasions.

These forces chose such violent actions as a way to compel the government into accepting their demand for secession. However, the assumption that the establishment of a separate state will answer all economic and political grievances is not well-supported. The cases of Ethiopia and Eritrea, the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union could be presented as examples, where separation was not followed by equality for all ethnic groups gained through the equitable distribution of power and resources. Instead, these countries have faced the emergence of new ethnic-based grievances and secessionist demands.

## Conclusion

At an institutional level, the current government has attempted to introduce federalism, but it has not fully succeeded in distributing authority and in empowering regional states to meet the needs of their constituencies. This has resulted in increased insurgency, particularly by the ONLF and OLF. For a federal system to achieve its intended objective, such as reducing secessionist tendencies, the existence of 'democratic government' is vital. The government needs to consider more than a constitutional division of power; the free and actual exercise of power by those regions should be ensured.

Attempts to bring about and ensure peace and to end existing hostilities should also involve neutral and mandated actors, such as the African Union. Previous initiatives by the government to negotiate peace have failed due to the asymmetrical power relationship between the government and the ethno-national insurgents. A statement made by the ONLF is worth remembering and considering: 'Any negotiations with Addis Ababa can only take place under the auspices of the international community in a neutral venue with a third neutral party mediator' (Sudan Tribune 2010).

More power must be devolved from the federal government to the regions and to sub-regional levels. Such decentralisation ensures checks and balances between the different levels of government and can ensure the accountability of regional government to protect the rights of minority groups. The capacity of regional units to develop their own policies and strategies that reflect contextual and local interests needs to be enhanced. A democratic mechanism that safeguards regional power should be established so that regions feel secure. It is important to open up space for other political parties (both ethnic-based and non-ethnic) to operate legally and within a decentralized and inclusive political set-up. These changes be targeted not only at the two particular regions where separatist groups operate, but should be applied across all regions. Most importantly, the government must be genuinely committed to a multi-party political system.



Peacebuilding at the institutional level should happen alongside the restoring of relationships. As stated by Francis, 'Whether in situations of latent conflict which have not yet erupted into violence, or in post-violence situations which remain volatile, work is needed to adjust and stabilise relationships ...' (2002:36). This could be done through government-level recognition of the unjust and unequal relationships promoted during previous governments, including public discussions that address past stereotypes. Such processes could build trust and cooperation between rival groups and between neighbouring regions as well as within regions; this level of trust could grow into trust of the system itself. The government needs to promote working relationships to reduce differences and to allow the emergence of interests that unite different groups, even when these might require changing the form of the federalism or revising the constitution.

To conclude, the federal system, introduced to avert ethnic conflict and secessionist tendencies, was not able to achieve its goals. The centralisation of economic and political power at federal level violates the principle of self-governance and of democracy in general. It is also jeopardized by ethnic favouritism, state partiality, and the absence of a commitment to a national goal. Secessionism still threatens Ethiopia's stability.



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# CESRAN SARAM

STRATEJİK ARAŞTIRMALAR VE ANALİZ MERKEZİ - SARAM  
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