

## **ETHNICITY AND ETHNIC FEDERALISM IN ETHIOPIA**

### **Amira Allo MOHAMMED**

Nevsehir HBV University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Sociology  
ORCID: 0000-0003-1928-3066

### **Assist. Prof. Dr. Ahmet Faruk YILDIRIM**

Nevsehir HBV University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Sociology  
ORCID: 0000-0002-8743-2740

### **ABSTRACT**

Ethiopia is an indigenously diverse and multicultural country. Ethiopia is home to over 81 languages and 86 ethnic groups. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) implemented ethnic federalism in 1991, reorganizing its regions along linguistic and ethnic lines. Ethnic problems and ethnic conflicts have emerged in recent years. Ethiopia's ethnicity problem is analogous to a pandemic outbreak. Ethnocentrism is spread across the whole country. The problem is getting worse. The relationship between different ethnic groups is deteriorating, and people are dying daily because of their ethnic background. As a result, the peaceful coexistence of communities has been affected. There is a fear that if the problem is not managed urgently, it could drag the nation into disintegration. Therefore, ethnic federalism is blamed for the conflict and tension between different ethnic groups in the country. Now a days, studies are being done on whether ethnic federalism outweighs the benefits of the problems. This becomes the main source of intense debate. In this regard, it is considered important to examine these discussions. The aim of this study is to examine the debates on ethnicity and ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. The ethno-linguistics of Ethiopia were discussed first, followed by Ethiopia's ethnic federalism and its benefits and drawbacks. A literature review was used as the method for this study.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, Ethnic Federalism, Societal Integration, Ethiopia.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The nation of Ethiopia is multicultural, multilingual, and multiethnic. Ethiopia has more than 81 languages and 80 different ethnic groups. Following its full and proclaimed legitimate control over the country, the then EPRDF government established an ethnic-based federalism system that fully recognizes linguistic and ethnic autonomy while preserving national unity. The EPRDF built a new administrative structure that was solely focused on ethnicity. Due to this, the country experienced a complete shift in political ideology as well as a significant transformation of its demographic, cultural, and socioeconomic features. This radical change also resulted in newly developed knowledge and awareness of ethnicity and the perspectives of ethnic groups.

There are two sections in this paper. The ethno-linguistic diversity of Ethiopia has been discussed in the first section: the ethnic, linguistic, and religious structures of Ethiopia. In the second section, ethnic federalism in Ethiopia and its advantages and disadvantages were also discussed.

### **ETHNO-LINGUISTICS DIVERSITY IN ETHIOPIA**

Ethiopia could legitimately be called a "museum of peoples." (Wagaw, 1999). Ethiopia is a multicultural, linguistic, with a diverse indigenous population. with more than 80 ethnic groups and around 80 languages.

### III. INTERNATIONAL ISTANBUL CURRENT SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH CONGRESS

February 8-9, 2023 / Istanbul-TÜRKİYE

WEB: <https://www.izdas.org/istanbul>

E-MAIL: [bizimetkinliklerimiz@gmail.com](mailto:bizimetkinliklerimiz@gmail.com)

Most of the ethnic groups have distinct languages; some even have their own writing systems and alphabets, such as Amharic and Geez. The Amharic language is the official "working language" of the federal government.

There are nine main ethnic groups that account for more than half the country's total population of 108,113,150 people. The Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups respectively make up the majority of the population, accounting for 62% of the total. The Oromo are the country's largest ethnic group. It contains 34.4% of the population. Although Oromo make up a large part of the population, they have historically been disregarded in politics. The Amhara ethnic groups are the second largest ethnic group and make up 27% of the second largest population after the Oromo ethnic. They are predominantly Christians, and Ethiopian Orthodox believers. The Tigray are the third-largest ethnic group. Despite making up only 7.3% of the population overall, the Tigray ethnic group had been dominated the politics. More than 20 years, they had been in power. 70% of the population is made up of these three main ethnic groupings. The remaining six ethnic groups of the nine main ethnic groups, namely Sidama, Wolaita, Gurage, Somalia, Hadiya, and Afar, have a population of more than one million. These nine large ethnic groups comprise almost 86% of the country's total population (Ethiopian National Census, 2007). The population of remaining ethnic groups accounts for very small percentage of the total population. When we look at the administrative structure of the government, Ethiopia has 11 administrative regions and two federal cities.

Understanding religion is necessary to comprehend the structure of modern Ethiopian society. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all had an impact on Ethiopian development in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and were involved in development "agendas" (GA ISIG Study Tour 2013). Christianity and Islam are the dominant religions in country. More over 32 million Ethiopian Orthodox Christians made up 43.5% of the country's population, together with over 25 million Muslims, 33.9%, just under 18 million Protestants, 20.6%, and the traditionalists are just under two million (Ethiopian National Census, 2007). Ethiopia has a long history of tolerance among different religions.

#### **THE CONCEPT OF FEDERALISM**

The term "Federalism" has been defined in a broad variety of ways by several scholars; consequently, any attempt to add to the large body of definitions currently in existence would only further confuse the public (Madebo, 2010). Federalism is a modern inclusiveness concept popularized by the United States of America. Its origins, however, can be traced back to the Urukwa nation, one of the major Native American tribes. Its origins can be traced back to various ancient civilizations around the world. Switzerland is an example of successful Federalism in the modern era. Federalism, on the other hand, is related to regionalism and has nothing to do with ethnicity. It has to do with when a larger country grants a Federal Government a limited amount of power. Typically, this entails dealing with other Foreign Sovereign nations before delegating the remainder of power to local levels known as Cantons, Districts, and States, or, in Ethiopian terms, Kudlins (Vasudeo, 2021).

Ethnic Federalism is an idea based on ethnic identity. Ethnic identity and linguistics were used to impose Ethnic Federalism on the people of Ethiopia. Ethiopian Federalism is distinct in that it is based on ethnicity and refers to itself as "Ethnic Federalism." Due to its distinctive nature, ethnic Federalism can be distinguished from other federal systems by recognizing ethnic identity in its political structures (Vasudeo, 2021: 3). Since Meles Zenawi, the late prime minister of Ethiopia, introduced this form of federalism, ethnic federalism is sometimes referred to as "Zenawism."

### **THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ETHNIC BASED FEDERALISM IN ETHIOPIA**

The Amhara (the ethnic group of the ruling elite) was the main ethnic group under Haile Sellassie's imperial rule, and other ethnic groups were assimilated into these Amhara cultures. EPRDF, the country's new ruling coalition after the Derg was overthrown in the early 1990s, developed an ethno-federal system that was purely based on ethnic identity as an alternative to the earlier model of ethnic assimilation (Joanny, 2016). The federal system of government was established in Ethiopia by the transitional government after the fall of the Derg regime in Ethiopia in 1991.

The EPRDF used the transitional charter and selected proclamation to declare its intentions to establish a new system of government that was federal in structure and based on a commitment to ethnically based self-determination even before the federal constitution was passed (Keller, 2002). Eritrea's secession as well as the rights of nations and ethnicities to self-governance, including the right to succession, are acknowledged in the charter of the transitional government. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) established ethnic federalism with the right to self-government for all regional parties, including the right to secession, in its 1994 constitution, which acknowledges ethnic conflict as the main political issue in the nation (Adegehe, 2009). Regional governments were granted the right to set up their own administration, develop and carry out economic, social, and political goals and plans, and the authority to prepare their own constitution and if the criteria fulfilled the right to secede (Aalen, 2002). It is clearly stated in Article 39 of the Ethiopian Constitution, which gives all Ethiopian peoples the right to self-governance and succession without any ambiguity. However, the practicability of this right is in question.

EPRDF Constitution establishes a federal government system made up of two distinct entities: the federal state and regional units. The 1994 constitution stipulates that both the federal and state governments create their own institutions, including legislatures, executive branches, and judicial and autonomous zones. There are Nine regional states and two city administration. Namely Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somalia, and Benishangul-Gumuz, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples, Gambela, regions as well as the city administrations of Addis Abeba and Dire Dawa, Territorial states are organized into kebales, special woredas, and areas in a hierarchical manner. According to Article 50(8) of the Constitution from 1994, regional and federal governments must respect one another's authority. However, the federal constitution implicitly establishes the federal government's intervention in regional states and the intervention of state bodies, particularly the executive, in other bodies at both the regional and federal state level. These interventions are also seen in the actual workings of the government that is currently in power (Siraw, 2015).

One factor that makes it difficult to implement the ideals of ethnic federalism is inter-ethnic politics. Regional and demographic factors are also impeding the adoption of the 1995 constitution's ideas. Simply put, some ethnic groups lack the territorial concentration required to become new member states. Multiple ethnic groups may coexist in one location when the population mosaic is especially complex without the specific geographical concentration that ethnic federation demands. Resources in terms of money, space, and people are also a barrier to ethnic federalism's implementation. Some of the smaller, more remote regional-states merely lack the administrative resources required to manage their newly gained abilities (Erk, 2017). Resources, geographical and demographic factors, and interethnic politics make ethnic federalism challenging to execute.

### **ADVANTAGE OF ETHNIC FEDERALISM**

Although ethnic federalism has many drawbacks, it does bring many benefits to the country. State bodies such as the HoF (federation house), the Federal Ministry of Affairs, district or district courts, and ruling parties have established new institutions for conflict resolution. Religious leaders and the local community have received some appreciation, despite the fact that government authorities typically oversee the procedure. As long as there are no major issues like "assault, highway robbery, murder, or certain political offences," as the government state it (Abbink, 2011). Apart from some major conflicts and crimes, whenever conflict occurs in the community, local religious authorities and community elders handle the situation with conflict mediation agency.

The system has certain benefits. It is evident that the Ethiopian state's choice to treat ethnicity seriously—possibly too seriously—in the political and geographic reorganization of the country has increased the cultural and political importance of groups who were previously underrepresented. The cultural elevation is particularly clear. A nation that for a very long time exclusively used one language for official business has given way to a federation whose member entities utilize several languages for official business inside their own borders. This has moved to the realm of education, where a number of languages are now used as the major teaching language, at least for the first few years of most elementary schools. Perhaps the most vibrant example of cultural uplift is the restoration of seasonal traditional gatherings that draw thousands of attendees and take the form of "carnivals" or "street festivals." The political improvement is less apparent. True and total community empowerment has proven elusive despite the system's ability to let communities handle their own business (Fessha, 2017).

According to some political thinkers, such as Chabal and Daloz, ethnic federalism in Ethiopia could be a good experiment. Cohen, Henz, and Kidane view the EPRDF's ethnic federalism positive way and see it as a powerful tool in Ethiopia's reconstruction (Teshome, Záhóřík, 2008: 9). Ethiopia's ethnic federalism has been supported and viewed as positive by some academics and some government officials of the country.

Although the EPRDF admits that the advent of ethnic federalism was motivated by pragmatic factors, it makes an effort to portray its goals as loftier than those mentioned above. Meles Zenawi stated that their only goal was to end the current conflict and prevent a new one from erupting. Furthermore, he claimed that ethnic federalism was required for democratically reconstructing the nation, increasing Ethiopian political participation, and granting ethno-regional rights to previously oppressed peoples or nationalities. The argument is based on the notion that only ethnicity, as defined by regionally defined ethnic rights, can lead to democracy. There has been a devolution of power and decentralization of authority. More money has been allocated to regional administrations, and some regional states can now act independently to get outside (even foreign) project funding (Aalen, 2002).

A liberated phase of ethnic and linguistic self-expression was brought about by Ethiopia's ethno-language-based federalism in the 1990s. People exercise their right to freedom of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic expression. For instance, a number of new publications about ethnohistory, language, and culture that were written by people in their community are becoming ever more widespread. No ethnic group or individual "shall be afraid or intimidated to develop their own ethnic group," the law states. Older degrading terms like "Shaqila," which is used to describe black southwestern ethnic minority, are illegal and may give rise to lawsuits for group humiliation. Major local languages like Sidama, Wolayita, Gamo, or Afar might be used by local officials to communicate during meetings and to track problems. (Abbink, 2011).

People's awareness of ethnicity led to the recognition of forgotten ethnic groups as members and citizens of the country, which were previously regarded as second citizens and bystanders to important socioeconomic and political decisions made by the ruling elites. Most of the time, those decisions directly affect them. This is one of the primary advantages of the adopted ethnic-based federalism system. The system also gave an opportunity for the country's various ethnic groups to express, develop, and even reshape their respective cultural, religious, and traditional norms and values, as well as the exclusive autonomy to twist them as their needs and desires determined.

### **DISADVANTAGE OF ETHNIC FEDERALISM**

It is evident that the system is problematic and ineffective and poses a severe threat to the country's unity in diversity given that Ethiopia has been practicing ethnic federalism for the past 28 years despite the fact that the nation is still racked by ethnic conflict and violent conflicts. It will be a "burden" rather than a "benefit" in Ethiopia since it sparks and rekindles tensions across the country. The administration made full use of the nation's ethnic diversity as a profitable area. The arrival of various ethnolinguistic groups with "past victim syndrome" and a desire to pursue their own unique interests through "revisionism of the status quo" was made possible as a result of this. Ethnic Federalism's experiment was a total failure, especially in terms of settling interethnic conflicts and advancing democracy among the populace. Instead, the country was forced to the middle of the ocean without a tideland by the curse of ethnic federalism and its failure to be implemented (Birru, 2018).

The reason why ethnic-based federalism in Ethiopia seems to fail is that, already after the fall of the Derg regime in 1991, the new government wanted to distinguish itself from the previous regimes, and ethnic federalism seemed to be the proper solution. Unfortunately, ethnic federalism has little to offer for the communities on the "periphery" due to the absence of effective government, democratic processes, and elections, as well as the accentuation of Ethiopia's ethnicity and diversity. Federalism is characterized by a "division of authority" and a "decentralized government," which is not what we may anticipate given Ethiopia's current ethnic-based federalism (Teshome ve Záhořík, 2008).

Ethnic federalism has been criticized as a source of ethnic conflict among different ethnic groups. Ethiopia was governed by two major political ideologies. A unitary system of government was the first official policy until the fall of the Derg regime in 1991. There are two stages to this system. The policy first aimed to foster unity without fully recognizing the difference that gave rise to hegemony and oppression (up until the collapse of imperial authority). The approach acknowledged racial and religious equality as well as linguistic diversity in the second phase (under the Derg government), but it was unsuccessful. The federal system of government, in place since 1991, is the second state policy. Emphasizing and supporting diversity could endanger the unity of the country by fostering tension, conflict, and lead to disintegration (Adamu, 2013).

"The original sin of Ethiopian federalism" is that governmental organization is solely based on ethnicity. The federation appear to be designed to make ethnicity the most important political identity. As a result, political competition is now be based on ethnicity as the dominant political identity. This is why ethnic-based parties made up more than two-thirds of the political parties represented at a recent meeting between the incoming prime minister and the heads of approximately 81 political groups. It is also the source of the current onslaught of requests for their own states from the country's various ethnic groups. The federation must continuously accommodate requests from ethnic 3/4 groups who, in search of "their homeland," want to be transferred from one state to another because the system has left them feeling like outsiders in the area they have traditionally inhabited.

### III. INTERNATIONAL ISTANBUL CURRENT SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH CONGRESS

February 8-9, 2023 / Istanbul-TÜRKİYE

WEB: <https://www.izdas.org/istanbul>

E-MAIL: [bizimetkinliklerimiz@gmail.com](mailto:bizimetkinliklerimiz@gmail.com)

This is also because ethnicity has been elevated to the status of a primary political identity. Furthermore, it has rendered millions of people second-class citizens. People who are not members of the locally privileged group face discrimination in terms of political rights, employment opportunities, and other state-provided benefits (Fessha, 2017).

However, there have been an increase in local border and identity issues, which are occasionally mischaracterized as "ethnic" conflicts. Many of the ethnic groups that were lately emphasized pushed in favor of their own distinctive administrative division. They frequently have a designated area (liyyu woreda). These boundary disputes occasionally escalated to deadly violence. All of this has increased regional intolerance and exclusive claim-making. The process generally appears to be shaped by a political economy of claim making for local authority, employment, and federal budgets, yet people may have the right to proclaim their recently discovered identities and may feel joyous doing so (Abbink, 2011).

Ethiopia's federalism also has a negative side in that it is imposed from above, putting together federations. Federalism shouldn't be imposed from above because its fundamental function is to keep nations united. It also shouldn't be utilized to undermine a country's sense of unity and indivisibility. Many crucial factors must also be taken into account for federalism to function in plural societies like Ethiopia (Madebo, 2010).

In Ethiopia, ethnic federalism plays a minor role in power distribution. The rigged elections that followed, as well as the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and other EPRDF coalition parties' political, military, and economic advantages over opposition parties, weakened the political and democratic institutions that were supposed to support the division of powers, restrict the actions of the executive branches, and prevent the federal government from getting involved in the internal affairs of regional states. The power of opposition parties to affect the approval of activities that violate their ethnic group is essentially nonexistent at all levels of government—federal, regional, and zonal. The rights of marginalized communities are not protected. The 1994 EPRDF constitution, which serves as the cornerstone of ethnic federalism, prevents minority representative from using veto power within or between parties. The executive organs have a lot of power and there aren't enough checks and balances across the various state organizations. Due to these constitutional defects, the ruling party is able to act illegally and suppress democratic principles, which results in discrimination, conflict, and the underdevelopment of specific groups (Siraw, 2015).

A new boundary demarcation brought about by the newly established ethnic-based federalism confined some ethnic groups into territory that was exclusively designated for their kind, while others landed there and over time became minorities and second-class residents. This situation gradually worsened, posing a new challenge for these groups. They first faced the danger of being assimilated by the dominant ethnic groups. Additionally, it became more difficult for them to guarantee their survival as a distinct ethnic group because they were not adequately represented in the local house of representatives. They have few options: either their rights will occasionally be violated or they must battle to protect it. The federal government often avoids becoming involved in such issues. Additionally, if it chose to intervene, it encountered obstacles that aggravated the circumstances. These issues are the primary cause of the country's current civil war.

#### CONCLUSION

Ethiopia is a multilingual and multiethnic country. The then transitional government, the EPRDF, adopted ethnic federalism as a state ideology as soon as it came to power in 1991. Ethnic federalism has numerous advantages. Ethnic federalism, according to EPRDF leaders and some academicians, ensures the equality of all ethnic groups.

III. INTERNATIONAL ISTANBUL CURRENT SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH  
CONGRESS

February 8-9, 2023 / Istanbul-TÜRKİYE  
WEB: <https://www.izdas.org/istanbul>  
E-MAIL: [bizimetkinliklerimiz@gmail.com](mailto:bizimetkinliklerimiz@gmail.com)

Ethnic federalism also recognizes previously disregarded and excluded minor ethnic groups right to freely express their culture, language, and ethnic identity. Ethnic federalism sought to reverse previous regimes' assimilation of various small ethnic groups into the dominant ethnic culture. Although ethnic federalism has benefits, it also has many drawbacks. It is argued that Article 39 of the Ethiopian Constitution, which conveys the right of ethno-regional communities to self-determination unconditionally, encourages the formation of disparate ethnic groups (Abbink, 2010). It is asserted that the system has led to an upsurge in interethnic conflict among the country's various ethnic groups in recent years. As a result of this the community's peaceful coexistence is disrupted. If this is not managed quickly, it could lead the nation to disintegration. When both extreme positions were put into action, eventually emerged that they had disastrous consequences. Generally, Ethiopia's ethnic-based federalism gives a mixed picture of successes and failures.

## REFERENCES

- Aalen, L. (2002). Ethnic federalism in a dominant party state: The Ethiopian Experience 1991-2000. CMI Report. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/769-ethnic-federalism-in-a-dominant-party-state.pdf>
- Abbink, J. (2011). Ethnic-Based federalism and ethnicity in Ethiopia: Reassessing the experiment after 20 Years. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5 (4), 596-618.
- Adamu, A. (2013). Intergroup relations among ethnically diverse university students in Ethiopia. *Journal of Education and Research*, 3 (2), 77-95.
- Adegehe, A. K. (2009). Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. A comparative study of the Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz regions. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/13839>
- Keller, E. J. (2002). Ethnic federalism, fiscal reform, development and democracy in Ethiopia. *African Journal of political science*, 7(1), 21-50.
- Birru, D. T. (2018). Ethnic federalism implementation in Ethiopia: The Paradox. *J Pol Sci Pub Aff*, 6, 350.
- Erk, J. (2017). Nations, nationalities, and peoples: The Ethnopolitics of ethnofederalism in Ethiopia, *Ethnopolitics*, 16 (3), 219-231.
- Ethiopian National Census. (2007). <http://www.csa.gov.et/component/phocadownload/category/14-all-survey-reports>
- Fessha, Y. (2017), The original sin of Ethiopian federalism. *Ethnopolitics*. 16 (3), 232-245, DOI: 10.1080/17449057.2016.1254410
- GA ISIG Study Tour (2013), Ethiopia. [https://www.geography.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/teaching%20resources/9.\\_Religion\\_in\\_Ethiopia.pdf](https://www.geography.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/teaching%20resources/9._Religion_in_Ethiopia.pdf)
- Joanny, B. (2016) Ethnic federalism and conflicts In Ethiopia, *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines*, 50 (2), 295-301.
- Madebo, E. (2010). Ethnic federalism and one party rule in Ethiopia. <http://ecadforum.com/articles/2010/03/15/ethnic-federalism-and-one-partyrule-in-ethiopia/>.
- Siraw, M. (2015). Weaknesses of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*. 4 (11), 49-54.
- Teshome B., W., Záhořík, J., (2008). Federalism in Africa: The case of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, *International Journal of Human Sciences*, 5 (2), 1-39.

III. INTERNATIONAL ISTANBUL CURRENT SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH  
CONGRESS

February 8-9, 2023 / Istanbul-TÜRKİYE

WEB: <https://www.izdas.org/istanbul>

E-MAIL: [bizimetkinliklerimiz@gmail.com](mailto:bizimetkinliklerimiz@gmail.com)

Vasudeo, K. (2021). Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia: Reflecting on diversity and ethnic identity. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 3 (1), 147-155. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.3.1.407>

Wagaw, T. (1999). Conflict of ethnic identity and the language of education policy in contemporary Ethiopia. *Northeast African Studies*, 6 (3), 75–88.