

Ethnic federalism and conflict in Ethiopia

*Bekalu Atnafu Taye**

Abstract

The current regime in Ethiopia adopted ethnic federalism and redesigned the country along ethnic lines as soon as it took political power in 1991. The aim of this article is to examine the prevalence of ethnic conflict in Ethiopia and to evaluate the potential causes of the conflicts that followed in the past twenty-five years. There are competing claims, for and against federalism. And though it may be accurate to state that the founding principles of federalism have few ideological shortcomings, it may be that technicality issues (types and forms) may hamper the imposed federal system in Ethiopia. Thus, ethnic conflicts prevailing in Ethiopia may be caused by such technicality problems and the ethnic federal arrangement in Ethiopia needs an urgent reconsideration before the case moves to the worst scenario.

Keywords: conflict, ethnic, Ethiopia, federalism, EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front), politics

* Dr Bekalu Atnafu Taye is Assistant professor at Kotebe Metropolitan University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Operational definition of ethnic conflict: Ethnic conflict is a dispute between two or more ethnic/tribal groups caused by the politicisation of tribal identity by self-seeking politicians.

1. Introduction

Federalism as an ideology, like socialism, communism and liberalism, is a pragmatic term which refers to the sharing of power among autonomous units and is considered to advocate the values of ‘unity in diversity’ or ‘shared rule and self-rule’ (Watts 2008:1) and to give regions some authority of their own. In his definition of federalism, Watts (2008:9) suggests that a federal system of government is one in which there is a division of power between one general and several regional authorities, each of which acts directly through his own administrative agencies. From a theoretical stand-point, the importance of a federal system, as shared by all political theories of federalism, is the sharing of power among regional states. This division of power may lead to the extinction of tyrannical regimes.

The other reason why a federal form of government is chosen over a unitary form is to accommodate divergent local interests that cannot bear centralised rule (Alemante 2003:85). Owing to this, a federal system of government as a solution was high on the agenda during the early phase of post-colonial politics in Africa as a potential way to reconcile unity and diversity. Unfortunately, such attempts ended up being rather short-lived experiments (Erk 2014). Those countries which employed federal systems for a short while and then curtailed them were Congo (1960–1965), Kenya (1963–1965), Uganda (1962–1966), Mali (1959), and Cameroon (1961–1972). Federalism’s track record as a source of instability and secession might well counsel against choosing this form of government for Sub-Saharan African states (Alemante 2003:85). Considering the negative experiences, a number of African countries have ignored a federal system of government. This is because the socio-cultural set-up of the African states is so hybrid in terms of identity, language and religion that the existing social realities might not entertain the federal model. The most striking feature of African identities and communities was their fluidity, heterogeneity and hybridity; a social

world of multiple, overlapping and alternate identities with significant movement of peoples, intermingling of communities and cultural and linguistic borrowing (Berman 2010:2).

Notwithstanding such scepticism, three countries in Africa (Ethiopia, South Africa and Nigeria) have chosen a federal form of government so as to accommodate ethnic diversity. But there are significant degrees of difference in the ways ethnic power is allocated and used in the three federal governments of Africa. The Nigerian federal structure is to give legitimacy to territory over ethnicity by distributing the core population of each ethnic group in several states and thus Nigeria's federal structure helps avoid the crystallisation of ethnic identity around a particular territory (Alemante 2003:100). The South African constitution-makers rejected the claims of certain ethnic groups to self-governing status on the basis of their distinctive ethnic identity, whereas the organisation of the Ethiopian state is founded upon ethnic federalism, which uses ethnic groups as units of self-government (Alemante 2003:78).

Seen from the perspectives of South Africa's and Nigeria's federal structures, Ethiopia's federal arrangement is highly ethnocentric. Implementing the federal system of government on the idea of ethno-nationalism, as shown in Ethiopia, could worsen matters. To put the idea more precisely, ethno-nationalism, a belief claiming the distinctiveness of a particular people and their right to self-rule in their homeland, will exacerbate community clashes into clashes of tribalism. Therefore, in order to defend a non-ethnic federal system and to promote the welfare of the society, federal states formulate a number of policies. For example, the territorial structure of Swiss federalism discourages the development of ethno-nationalism across language community lines (Alemante 2003:101). Similarly, the Ghanaian Constitution (Article 55:4) strictly prohibits any political party organised on the basis of ethnic identity. Furthering the discussion, Alemante suggested that federalism, even when it is not coupled with ethnicity, has generally not had a distinguished record as a stable form of government, and referred to the fact that even a 'philosophically and legally' sophisticated

federal system – that of the United States – has not been spared the tragedy of a costly civil war due to separatist demands (Alemante 2003:85).

Despite the presence of many good ideas and sound principles in the ideology of federalism, there are considerable dangers involved in accepting the idea of federalism in the African context. Here, it should be noted that federalism is not the only factor that influences conflict; there are also a number of perceptible modalities that should be taken into account along with federalism such as the nature of federalism (such as territorial, multinational and ethnic), the forms of federalism (symmetric or asymmetric/congruent or incongruent), the socio-cultural set-up of the society, the degree of autonomy (given for sub-national government), the gravity of the regime's totalitarian institutional structures, and the like. Under the banner of federalism, the aforementioned factors are easily manipulated by African leaders for their own advantage, and in so doing they spoil the ideological foundations of the concept. The politicisation of African states changed to political ethnicisation as African leaders maneuvered to inherit power (Ake 1993:3). Ethnicity itself (or our natural difference) cannot be a source of conflict. Rather the forms of the federal structure (when ethnic) coupled with the politicisation of tribal identity cause such problems. This will receive more detailed discussion in section four which deals with inappropriate applications of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia.

In light of this, the main objective of this article is to show the level of ethnic conflicts caused by the politicisation of tribal identity in Ethiopia. This article is organised in the following sections. Section two gives a brief description of the historical background and the nature of the current political system in Ethiopia. Under this section, I want to portray background information about Ethiopia and explain how the current government of Ethiopia came to power. Section three deals with ethnic conflict in Ethiopia and section four is about conflict-promoting applications of federalism. The last section, section five, presents the conclusion and recommendations. Despite some human rights reports on ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia, no one has made an inventory of ethnic conflicts according to technicality problems of ethnic federal arrangement in Ethiopia. Thus, analysing such conflicts with more

rigour made available by the social sciences and modern contemporary approaches is necessary. The method used in the study is qualitative, and empirical data such as published documents, letters and reports compiled by human rights defenders and organisations are used.

2. Historical background

Ethiopia is an ancient country with a number of peculiarities; some of which are independence (free from colonialism), drought, poverty, and indigenous scripts. Despite being Africa's oldest independent country, Ethiopia is one of Africa's poorest states, better known for its periodic droughts, famines, and intermittent civil conflicts.

With regard to modernisation, Emperor Tewodros was recognised as being the first to begin his modernisation in politics by trying to unify the fragmented polities of Ethiopia under the banner of *ser'at* (ordered governance). Considering the vision of Emperor Tewodros, Emperor Menelik consolidated imperial authority, defended Ethiopian independence, and began the process of creating and supporting modern Ethiopia. Alemayehu (2014) stated that by securing Ethiopian independence and sovereignty, Menelik united Ethiopia and inaugurated the modern Ethiopian state from petty feuding kingdoms. Holding a similar view, Bahru (2002:60) noted that it was to be Menelik's main claim to historical distinction that he presided over the realisation of an idea that had first been kindled in the fiery mind of Tewodros.

The Ethiopia of today, not the ancient Abyssinia, was born as a result of internal power struggles between Menelik II and forces competing to control additional territories during the 19th century. In the process of territorial expansion, regional lords who surrendered themselves to Menelik II, were allowed to rule their areas by paying a certain amount of geber (tribute or tax) to the ruler of Shoa (central government). Southern rulers who peacefully submitted to Menelik II, such as the rulers of Jimma, Wollega, Bale, Benshangul and Assosa, were allowed to rule their territories by paying a fixed amount of tribute (Bahru 2002:87). One could take this as

a historical justification for a federal system since Ethiopians have lived for longer periods under decentralised forms of government (Assefa 2006:135). For most of its history, it existed as a de facto federal system in which the emperor exercised matters of national importance, while regional kingdoms had power to levy tax, guarantee local security and regulate trade. That is, the regional rulers had some degree of autonomy to govern their respective regions, which is the modern essence of federalism. Thus, the nineteenth century Ethiopian emperor, Menelik, operationalised the federal system of government that was geography-based, not ethnic. In the light of this, Mesfin (1999:142) stated that the structure of the traditional Ethiopian state was federal, having many kings (governing their own provinces) but one king of kings (ruling the whole state). Emperor Menelik II was credited for being the first to implement a federal system before the concept of federalism flourished in the Western political market.

In view of the above, during the imperial periods, a central issue in Ethiopian politics was the struggle between regional and central forces. For example, during the imperial era, the struggle was expressed through continuous disputes between the central king or emperor and the regional lords and princes (Bahru 2002:61). The former power struggles between the central and the regional rulers changed from a struggle for territorial expansion into a class struggle. And the 1974 Revolution which was provoked by the Ethiopian Student's Movement was a national class struggle. It was not an ethnic conflict. During the revolution, a pool of educated elites, mostly Marxists in orientation, formed a number of political parties and intensified the growing wave of change. The twentieth century Ethiopian elites, participating in the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), viewed the problems in Ethiopia as a result of class conflicts and not as an outcome of struggles between ethnic groups (Aalen 2002:4).

Among the members of the students' movement, however, the most ethnically conscious students were invariably the Tigrigna speakers (Young 2006:82). Owing to this, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) leaders asserted that the early 20th century students' movement was a struggle among ethnic

groups. In disagreement with the allegation of the TPLF leaders, however, a number of scholars teaching at the then Haile Selassie I University (HSIU) asserted that the reaction to the massive oppression and exploitation of the people of Ethiopia appeared to be a class struggle (Young 2006:81). According to Gebru, the peasants rebelled against the state not particularly because it was controlled and dominated by the Shoan Amhara, but primarily because it was oppressive (Gebru 1977:215). This movement did not have an ethnic foundation (Mesfin 2012); the main movement with ethnic-centred politics at the time was the one in Eritrea led by the Eritrea Liberation Front (ELF). It may therefore be said that the students targeting the ruling class were against human exploitation irrespective of the rulers' ethnic background. Most student activists rejected the assertion that national divisions were designed to promote tribalism, and were comfortable with the regime's policy of avoiding references to ethnicity in any context (Young 2006:80). Not surprisingly, foreign professors teaching at HSIU at this time often noted the low level of ethnic consciousness of their students (Young 2006:81).

In spite of this general atmosphere, however, the Tigrigna speakers who were ethnically conscious began to spread their particular xenophobia, claiming that the alleged class struggle was actually ethnic. This was due to resentments and antagonisms they had against the then rulers whom they assumed to be Amhara. The Tigrayan nationalists saw the Amhara domination as the major reason behind the problems in Ethiopian society (Aalen 2002:38). But this seems to be a grand misinterpretation of Ethiopian history. First, it was not the Amhara hegemony that caused Ethiopia's backwardness but rather the power monger rulers.

Secondly, allegations of purely self-interested resource management seem to have been unjustly directed at the population of Amhara. But all Ethiopians or all provinces in the country suffered from lack of schools, industries, medical centres, other infrastructure and basic social services. Tigray was not exceptional. Lack of state investment in Tigray might have limited development, but there is little evidence that Tigray suffered disproportionately to other parts of non-Shoan Ethiopia in this respect (Young 2006:89). The corrupt feudal regime of Haile-Selassie and the

military junta of the Dergue were responsible for the mass oppression, and all ethnic groups were under the yoke of corruption and misrule. In both these cases, the leaders endorsed the validity of the statement that political leadership is a major culprit in the perennial conflict and competition over resources (Adejumobi 2007:139).

It was in this context that the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) appeared on the scene and was officially established in 1975. Their manifesto issued in 1976 called for the establishment of an independent republic of Tigray, but this was later modified to cultural and political autonomy for the region within a united Ethiopia (Aalen 2002:6). With the support of the popular mass, TPLF, along with its allies in the form of parties and/or movements, took power in 1991 and the most nationalist regime in modern Ethiopian history was removed from power.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) is a set comprising four elements; namely, the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and the South Ethiopian People's Democratic Front (SEPDF). Despite the aforementioned alliance, however, TPLF alone dominated the Ethiopian political scenery and drafted and ratified a constitution in 1994 (Vestal 1999:84). In Ethiopia, political power is confined to and wielded by a very small circle, dominated by the TPLF – representing a minority group in the ruling coalition.

The political culture of EPRDF is different; it is very secretive and stubborn. Reports of murder, ethnic conflict, ethnic cleansing, public dissatisfaction, famine and similar problems cannot be brought to the media. The Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation has not been allowed to entertain the idea that accounts of ethnic conflict are worth reporting. Government-controlled media closely reflected the views of the government and the ruling EPRDF (Human Rights Watch 2014a:12). The State-run Ethiopian Radio and Television has had the largest broadcast range in the country and the majority of Ethiopians do not have any alternative source of information, either from television, radio or any form of electronic media. The state-owned Ethio-Telecom is

the only internet service provider in the country. The government monitors telephone calls, text messages, and e-mails. Moreover, it jams foreign broadcasts and restricts access to the internet and blocks several websites. Any independent media agency has to avoid reporting on sensitive topics; otherwise, the agency would be accused of defamation or subversion charges. The TPLF-controlled Broadcasting Corporation does not have the real colour of a broadcasting agency; it has developed the habit of slaying truth with the swords of falsehood. Citing the International Telecommunication Union, Human Rights Watch (2014a:14) reported that approximately 1.9 percent of individuals used the internet in 2013 in a population of over ninety million. In this regard Amnesty International (2014/15:148) reported that the Media Law, Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSP) and Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (ATP) limit freedom of expression and effective citizens' participation in political activities. Furthering the discussion, Human Rights Watch (2014b:2) stated that unlike most other African countries, Ethiopia has a complete monopoly over its telecommunication sector through the state-owned operator, Ethio-Telecom. Despite low access, the government maintains a strict system of controls over digital media, making Ethiopia the only Sub-Saharan African to implement nationwide internet filtering (Freedom on the Net 2013:266). In view of this, under the present regime of EPRDF, Ethiopia has the third worst internet service in the world, after Somalia and Niger, and is the fourth worst jailer of journalists in the world and second worst in Africa (Alemayehu 2016). Seen from the Ethiopian government's authoritarian policy perspective, being an honest journalist is terrorism, refusing to cooperate with the government is terrorism, and being conscious of events in general is terrorism.

In view of the above, what is happening in one corner of the country cannot be known elsewhere, unless it is recorded and aired by international media agencies, human rights defenders or the Ethiopian Human Rights Council. It is in such a restricted scenario that the Ethiopian Human Rights Council has documented such reports (see the appendix). Therefore, these ethnic conflicts which have been documented by the Ethiopian Human Rights Council are a small selection from many. All of them could not be recorded by the Human

Rights Council due to the government's restrictions on independent human rights activists, as well as due to financial and human resources constraints.

3. Ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia

Apart from the conflicts stated in the appendix, illustrations provided by Human Rights Watch (2014a:20), Amnesty International (2014/15:148), Moresh Wegenie Amhara Organisation (2016), and the Human Rights Council (1992–2015) stated that there were a number of cases of ethnic tension and ethnic cleansing happening in the country. Fuelled by ethnic federalism or the politicisation of tribal identity, the regional government officials in the Oromia Regional State forcibly evicted about one hundred thousand ethnic Amhara from their homes. The majority of ethnic Amhara living in Western Harergie, Western Arsi, Arbagugu, Jimma, Guraferda, Wellega, Afar, Benshangul, and Western Shoa were displaced, killed or mistreated because of their ethnicity – which they never had a chance to choose before birth. According to these sources, the forced exclusion of people from their places of residence has been continuing (Human Rights Council 2015b:4b).

As can be seen from the table in the attached appendix, there were documented conflicts which took place from 1997 to 2015. These were some of the disputes recorded by the Human Rights Council. The major recurring causes of the conflict were disagreements about the possession or use of land, grazing land or water resources, and about settlements, regional hegemony, access to State resources (funds, jobs, investments) and language policy in education and administration (Aalen 2002:70). Aalen (2002:70) also states that in the southern region there is a large potential for inter-ethnic struggles for regional hegemony because of the region's ethnic heterogeneity, but that until now, conflicts over self-government and representation have taken place only at local level in the zones or *woreda*. Examples of such conflicts are the language issue in Wolaita in North Omo zone, the Silte's request for independence from the rest of the Gurage zone and conflicts between Suri and Dizi pastoralist groups in South Omo zone. The western lowland regions of Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella have both a majority consisting of two

major ethnic groups and a minority of several smaller ones. In Gambella, the Nuer and the Anwak have fought for regional hegemony. In Benishangul-Gumuz, the Berta and the Gumuz, who together make up the majority of the population, have been at odds with each other. In both states, the two majority groups fought against each other for the control of the regional government (Aalen 2002:69). In Somali, the conflicts have been between different pastoralist clans of the Somali tribe. In Afar region, which is also a pastoralist and clan based society, the same problem has been experienced.

The majority of conflicts in Ethiopia that are dubbed 'ethnic', are about land and the boundaries between territorialised ethnic groups (Abbink 2006:389). That is, the federal structure which is based on ethnicity contributes to ethnic tensions and conflicts, widening the disparities among the ethnic groups. Had it not been ethnic federalism, there could have been a symmetry model of federalism, with proportional territorial and population size in the various sub-regional states – which could have had the potential to reduce conflicts. Now, however, ethnic groups are competing with each other and several inter-ethnic conflicts have arisen across boundaries of regional states that are drawn along ethnic lines (Legesse 2015:2; Abbink 2006:390). Ethnic conflicts particularly led to injury, death and displacements of citizens in Afar, Gambella, Southern regional state, and Somali Regions (Human Rights Watch 2014a:20). In the present conditions, we contend that the post-1991 regime in Ethiopia, despite its promise and claims to provide solutions, has been less successful than expected in managing ethnic tensions in the country, and has basically only 'decentralised' the problems by defining the sources of conflict as local, not national (Abbink 2006:390; Young 1999:329; Yohannes et al. 2005:10).

4. Conflict-promoting applications of federalism

The so-called 'EPRDF government' established a federal system focusing on ethnic identity after ratifying the new constitution in 1994 (Ethiopia 1994). The 'EPRDF's constitution' Article 47 (1) classifies the member states of the 'Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia' into nine regional states (refer to appendix II). The indivisibility of the Ethiopian nation which has

been the result of thousands of years of interaction has been eroded and the stable ethnic composition has been disrupted by the introduction of ethnic federalism, so that Ethiopians are now at odds along ethnic lines. Legesse (2015:5) reckons that Ethiopian ethnic groups are rivals with each other since the institutionalisation of ethnicity in the early 1990s. Ethnicity which is driven by the politicisation of tribal identity has the tendency to cause problems. The critics of ethnic federalism note that the seed of tribalism which was a cause for ethnic conflict was sown with the coming into power of the EPRDF.

Since the advent of ethnic federalism that politicised tribal identity, there have been a number of conflicts, cases of ethnic cleansing and unspeakable crimes committed against humanity in the country; and all these have taken place without fair responses from the 'EPRDF/TPLF government'. Ethnic politics generates hostility amongst Ethiopia's different ethnic groups that hinders group interaction and entails ethnic conflicts. Due to the policy of the ruling party, mutual suspicion and hostility causing ethnic cleansing and conflict are bound to emerge even at the present time. What then are the conflict-promoting applications of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia?

4.1 The politicisation of tribal identity (Ethnic federalism)

As stated above, ethnic conflict cannot be blamed on ethnicity, but rather on the politicisation of ethnic identity by self-seeking politicians. In light of this, of all the modalities of federalism (territorial, multi-national, ethnic, quasi-federal), ethnic federalism, with its politicising of ethnic identity, is obviously the one that can cause inter-ethnic problems. Research studies also show that if ethnic differences are high and politicised and if 'federal bargain' type solutions are difficult to achieve, then decentralisation may result in greater ethnic mobilisation and may lead to secession (Abbasi 2010:13). In ethnically polarised countries, ethnic group loyalty induces citizens to vote for their ethnic party, which increases ethnic grievance and the probability of civil war (Valfort 2007:5). As can be seen from the table in the attached appendix, there have been a number of ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia since the introduction of ethnic federalism. For instance, due to government-spurred

divisiveness, the two tribes (Guji and Borena Oromo) that have historically managed to peacefully alternate control of their own region, have clashed due to the fact that the 'EPRDF government' has allegedly been inciting leaders of the subgroups (Holder et al. 2006:23). These scholars further state that the current situation in Ethiopia presents dangers that could affect all ethnic groups in the future (Holder et al. 2006:10). That is, the federal system of government with the politicisation of tribal identity could cause deep ethnic division that brings multiple problems such as secessionist movements and a culture of mistrust.

As noted in the foregoing paragraph, the 'EPRDF's constitution' Article 47 (1) classifies the member states of the 'Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia' as nine regional states and divided Ethiopians along ethnic lines thus institutionalising their divisions. Furthermore, the constitution itself has the potential to invite conflict as in the case of self-determinism. Article 39 (1) of the Federal Constitution states: 'Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession'. Considering article 39 (1), Aalen (2002:59) states that this is clearly a constitutional anomaly, and does not have any parallels in other federal systems today. A government that is concerned with the wellbeing of a nation does not constitutionally encourage ethnically grouped people to set apart from the whole nation. Taking this article into account, some groups, such as the Oromo People Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), have fought against the federal government claiming the right to self-determination up to secession. Amnesty International (2014/15:151) points out that armed opposition groups remained in several parts of the country or in neighbouring countries although in most cases with small numbers of fighters and low levels of activity.

Article 39 (1) of the Federal Constitution has the potential to create lasting conflict, distrust and hatred among ethnic groups today. Vestal (1999:165) notes that mistrust and hatred among ethnic groups grow out of the EPRDF's theory of governance. The 'EPRDF government' has sought to govern by playing upon animosities between Ethiopia's different ethnic groups (Vestal

1999:184). Citing the conflicts between the *Dizi* and *Suri* ethnic groups, the Oakland Institute's field research (2014:16) indicates that the Ethiopian government is manipulating existing tensions between and among groups. The Human Rights Council (2015a:7) in its press release states that in every ethnic conflict, the hidden hands of governmental officials have been observed as trying to get political and economic advantages. It was not only the central policy of ethnic federalism that exacerbated tensions and conflicts, but decentralised ethnic-based administrations were also sowing seeds of ethnic awareness and antagonism. In other words, ethnic politics is able to divide the society, and ethnic groups are likely to develop mistrust against one another. In this regard, Turton (2006:14) argues that the federal 'remapping' of Ethiopia along ethnic lines, by imposing a fixed ethno-territorial grid on population with a long history of mobility and internal migration, has led to an increase rather than decrease of inter-ethnic conflict.

To get rid of challenges related to ethnicity, countries tend to prohibit discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, to provide individuals with equal rights regardless of their ethnic identity (Alemante 2003:73), and to strictly ban ethnic politics or parties. For example, the multi-national western federations (such as Switzerland and Canada) do not support ethnicity as the chief instrument of state organisation. Even in African countries, such as Uganda and Eritrea, tribal or religious parties are discouraged (Mesfin 1999:157). The Ghanaian Constitution, Article 55 (4), prohibits tribal or ethnic-based political parties and it clearly states 'Every political party shall have a national character, and membership shall not be based on ethnic, religious, regional or other sectional divisions'. Contrary to this, the EPRDF Constitution, Article 46 (2), encourages ethnicity and tribal affiliation, and blatantly declares: 'States shall be structured on the basis of settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the people'. Ethiopia and Ghana are multi-ethnic societies with ethnic inequalities and historical rivalries but in Ethiopia, ethnic politics are the foundation and the lifeline of the TPLF which requires states to be structured as homogeneous tribal homelands, in much the same way as the Bantustans of apartheid South Africa (Alemayehu 2015). Even during elections, Ghanaian candidates are

required to get a minimum level of support in all regions of the country (Alemayehu 2015) but the Ethiopian government has been committed to perpetuating ethnic distinctiveness and political parties organised along ethnic lines. Accordingly, about sixty ethnically organised parties are found in the Ethiopian political landscape.

In view of the above, a non-ethnic, non-tribal multi-party democracy is the only viable option that could guarantee stability, equity and economic development. This can be learnt from comparing Ghana and Ethiopia which are, respectively, democratic and developed, and undemocratic and poor.

4.2 The design of the federal States

The design of federal units and administrative structures, whether symmetric or asymmetric, may cause problems and conflict. As observed by Aalen (2002:66), as well as Yohannes and others (2005:34), the delimitation of the federal units in Ethiopia has not only created very dissimilar constituent parts and an asymmetrical federal system, but also many regional states with ethnic heterogeneity within their borders, and several states in which the competition between ethnic groups or clans for regional hegemony has led to destabilisation and weakening of the regional governments. In symmetric federal arrangements, all federal units have the same powers and the same number of representatives in a second chamber of parliament but in the case of asymmetric federation, all federal units do not have the same powers. For example, Ethiopia and Russia which employ high levels of incongruent and asymmetric federalism, respectively, have experienced moderate-to-high levels of conflict since adopting their most recent constitutional arrangements (Lancaster 2012:60). Under symmetric federalism, sub-regional states are treated as equals as in the case of the United States but in asymmetric federalism, sub-national governments are treated differently, such as in Russia where each ethnic republic has its own president, whereas the *Oblasts* and the *Krai* have appointed governors (Lancaster 2012:7). A completely congruent system is one in which no federal subunit has a distinct social or cultural identity. For example, Australia would be a case in hand for a completely congruent federation, despite the fact that the

Northern Territory has the highest proportion of indigenous Australians in any Australian state; on the other hand, the Ethiopian and Belgian examples represent nearly completely incongruent federalism, with the boundaries for those states drawn up on ethno-linguistic lines (Lancaster 2012:24). The principles behind asymmetric federalism's potential to mitigate civil conflict in a state are similar to those of incongruent federalism (Lancaster 2012:22). Ethiopia and Russia are somewhat similar in their designs of provincial units with Ethiopia a nearly incongruent federation featuring ethnically based subunits while Russia has extensive asymmetry with a nontrivial amount of subunits given special status in relation to the other federal subjects and the central government. On the other hand Brazil demonstrates completely congruent and symmetric federalism.

Along with their forms of federation, Ethiopia and Russia have experienced civil conflicts at various junctures but Brazil has so far been a peaceful and stable federal state. Citing the quantitative sections of the study, Lancaster (2012:41) has shown that both incongruence and asymmetry have statistically significant effects on increasing the likelihood of conflict onset and the severity of conflicts. Groups that are not recognised under incongruent or asymmetric federations may organise protests to try to gain a greater level of recognition constitutionally (Lancaster 2012:60). A case in point is the *Sidama* ethnic groups in Ethiopia having three million people and failing to get the status of a regional state whereas the *Harari* whose overall population is 185 000 has been accorded a regional state. In the 2006–07 Ethiopian fiscal years, the *Harari* region received approximately 90 million Ethiopian birr (ETB) (Lancaster 2012:46) but the *Sidama Regional Zone* got less since it did not have the regional status level. Inequitable distribution of wealth and poor fiscal management are said to cause problems in federalism. The troubles that these particular ethnic groups display show that incongruent and ethnic federalism can be a recipe for grievance and potentially for conflict if an ethnic group is not recognised as important enough by the federal government (Lancaster 2012:46).

Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia does not consider the existing social reality of a society so intertwined that it is hard to draw a line between or among

the various ethnic groups. In the Ethiopian context, most ethnic groups could not inhabit territorially defined geographical areas. Pointing out the limitations of the federal system in Ethiopia, Assefa (2006:135) argues that a significant number of Ethiopians do not live in the places where the majority of the members of their ethnic group are to be found; they have moved, either voluntarily, in search of better opportunities, or by force, due to the Dergue's resettlement and villagisation.

4.3 Fiscal federalism

Another important issue that needs much attention is the way in which money is distributed from the federal government to various regional states. In federation, central governments distribute funds to sub-national governments and there is a need to have effective systems of revenue sharing between the central and regional governments that could increase the effectiveness of the federal system. In distributing funds to sub-national governments, the central government could use a variety of fiscal federal criteria such as: population size, level of poverty and revenue generation capacity (Lancaster 2012:45). In Ethiopia, the powers of sub-national states are constitutionally protected, but in reality the forms of decentralisation are quite limited by fiscal, political and administrative centralism (Dickovick 2014). Due to the subjectivity of the parameters and the autocratic nature of the federal government, the fiscal federal funds are not distributed to the sub-regional governments in a genuinely fair way. Regional states in Ethiopia have alleged in the past that the EPRDF is mainly focused on disproportionately helping out the Tigray region (Lancaster 2012:45). Since the key federal government positions have been monopolised by one ethnic party, the TPLF of Tigray, there has never been a fair mechanism of allocating the finance. The balance of power clearly lies with the TPLF and the resulting inequalities give rise to situations of violent conflict. The management of the national resources does not serve the national objectives of realising genuine development, reducing poverty and increasing the standard of living. In the absence of an effective, transparent and accountable system, the federal government dominates the

process of fiscal distribution, which creates a sense of discontent among the various ethnic groups.

For the structures of fiscal federalism to function properly, there needs to be a fair and equitable distribution of financial resources between the central government and the states (regions). Where this does not happen, there will obviously be a strong potential for conflict. For instance, a great deal of dissatisfaction in the federal-provincial relationship in Pakistan has been observed around the distribution of financial resources (Abbasi 2010:36). In the Ethiopian context, regional states have a weak fiscal autonomy and they have to depend on the federal government's allocation of funds, which is quite unbalanced (Lancaster 2012:45).

4.4 Dominant-party governance

In a similar vein, dominant-party control along with an undemocratic nature of a given state could be another factor that could create conflict among ethnic groups. Both the EPRDF in Ethiopia and the ANC in South Africa have dominated elections since the advent of federalism in the 1990s, but South Africa is relatively democratic and Ethiopia authoritarian; South Africa has a relatively advanced economy, but Ethiopia does not (Dickovick 2014). When the less secure People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria is also taken into account, it may be said that dominant-party governance holds across the range of regime types from a relatively democratic South Africa through the flawed democracy in Nigeria to the exclusionary authoritarian system in Ethiopia (Dickovick 2014). The Ethiopian federal structure appears to be that of one-party state governance, which is characterised by highly concentrated and centralised powers maintained by totalitarian institutions such as the military, other security organs and state-controlled mass media.

Despite the fact that the EPRDF has had a federal-like system in theory, the centralised power coupled with authoritarianism and undemocratic nature of the regime equates the government with the communist party of USSR. The collapse of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia created a situation in which the effectiveness of constitutional federal structures

has been questioned. Some scholars have argued that democratic deficits in communist countries as well as federal systems, which were organised around national groups, promoted nationalist movements to their eventual fall as federations (Bunce 2004 cited in Abbasi 2010:7).

One of the most significant reasons for the formation of a federal government has been to combat tyrant regimes by decentralising the powers of the government. But an attempt to mix Marxist ideology of one-party rule with federalism is believed to create contradictory scenarios. The former indoctrinates centralisation of political power while the latter teaches decentralisation of power. As it is quite evident today in Ethiopia, the blending of two contradictory ideologies coupled with the modalities of the federal structures (such as ethnic federalism, asymmetric and incongruent forms of federalism, dominant-party governance) provide valid reasons for the prevailing ethnic conflict in Ethiopia.

An attempt has been made here above to give an overview of federalism, mainly focusing on its forms and types. In a nutshell, in a multi-national and multi-cultural country, federalism might be an effective method of bringing about political stability and order. However, inappropriate application of the principle in a specific context, such as that of an authoritarian and undemocratic government, may yield just the opposite results, which may contribute to ethnic clashes and conflicts, and to disintegration of national unity.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Entertaining ethnic diversity in multi-lingual and multi-cultural societies using federalism is a bone of contention for most scholars in the area. Some scholars choose the federal system of government to accommodate ethnic diversity but many commentators have observed that a federal system of government is inherently fragile even without adding ethnicity into the mix (Alemante 2003:56). There is considerable evidence to suggest that ethnic federalism entails conflict since it politicises tribal identity and scholars soundly refute its applicability, especially in the Ethiopian context. When it

was introduced and developed, social critics and intellectuals have stated the negative consequences of ethnic federalism in the Ethiopian context since this nation is an ancient country having multi-cultural and multi-lingual societies that have been assimilated due to thousands of years of continuous interaction, intermarriage, trade, migration, and other social activities. But the 'current government' has imposed a federal structure and has politicised human diversity.

Federalism, not ethnic, if appropriately applied, 'might be an effective method of bringing about political stability and order' but in the Ethiopian case, the politicisation of ethnic identity by self-seeking political leaders causes political instability. The desire of the self-seeking political leaders is manifested through the politicisation of tribal identity – in their design of the federal states, their fiscal federalism and their dominant-party system. All these (politicisation of tribal identity, design of the federal states, fiscal federalism and dominant-party) cause ethnic conflict and anomaly in the country.

To remedy this acute systemic illness, the 'government' has to stop politicising human diversity and the ethnic federal arrangement in Ethiopia needs an urgent reconsideration. A non-ethnic, non-tribal multi-party democracy has to be established as the only viable option that could more effectively address the typical causes of conflict and guarantee stability, equity and economic development.

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Appendix 1: List of ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia from 1997 to 2015 during the EPRDF regime

Note: This list is not complete but sums up the main incidents. The references ‘HRC’ refer to Ethiopian Human Rights Council 1992–2015.

Time of the conflict	Places of the conflict	Consequences of the conflict	Causes of the conflict
July 1997	Between Guji Oromo and Gedion people	One hundred and forty people died and one hundred thousand people were displaced.	Ethnic-based leadership instead of competence-based leadership (HRC, 35 th special Issue, p. 133).
December 1999	Between Wolaita and Gamo ethnic groups	Many people died and a number of people were injured.	Ethnic-based leadership (HRC, 35 th special Issue, p. 133).
February 2000	In Northern Shoa between Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups	Many people died and a number of people were injured.	Ethnic-based leadership (HRC, 35 th special Issue, p. 133).
September 2000	In Eastern Wollega, between Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups	Many people died and a number of people were injured and displaced.	Ethnic-based leadership (HRC, 35 th special Issue, p. 133).
February 2001	In Eastern Wollega, between Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups	One hundred people were killed; four people were injured; ten thousand nine hundred Amhara were displaced.	Regional leaders decided to cleanse Amhara ethnic groups from the region (HRC, 68 th special Issue, p. 158).
August 2002	In Gambela, between Agniwak and Nuwier	Sixty people were killed; forty one people were injured; eight thousand seven hundred and eighty people were displaced and eight districts were burnt and unknown number of people sank in Baro River and died.	Ethnic competition between Agniwak and Nuwier ethnic groups on administrative matters (HRC, 55 th special Issue, p. 341).
February 2003	In SPNN, between Dizie and Surma ethnic groups	Thirty-one individuals were killed and five people were injured; one hundred and fifty-two residents were burnt; one hundred and sixty-six cattle were stolen.	Due to the politicization of ethnic identity (HRC, 59 th special Issue, p. 24).
October 2003	In SPNN, among Dizie, Manit and Surma ethnic groups	Forty-one individuals were killed; one thousand four hundred and eighty people were displaced.	Ethnic competition (HRC, 66 th special Issue, p. 143).

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November 2003	In Western Hararga, in Meisa, Woreda between Oromo and Somalia ethnic group	Nineteen people died; twenty-one people were injured; thirty-four camels were stolen; twenty-seven residences were burnt.	Competition between the two ethnic groups on regional hegemony (HRC, 71 st special Issue, p. 227).
December 2003	In Gambela, between Agniwak and Nuwier	Ninety-three people were killed; forty-two people were injured.	Ethnic identity was politicised by the government and there were competitions among ethnic groups on regional power (HRC, 72 nd special Issue, p. 233).
December 2003	In Gambela, between Agniwak and Nuwier	Thirteen people died; twenty people were injured; one hundred and ninety three shops were robbed; six thousand families were displaced.	Competition between the two ethnic groups on regional hegemony (HRC, 73 rd special Issue, p. 248).
January 2005	In Eastern Harerga, between Oromo and Somalia ethnic groups	Fourteen people died and ten people were injured; one thousand six hundred and twenty-eight people were displaced; sixty cattle, four donkeys and twenty-six camels were stolen.	Claims on ethnic boundary (HRC, 82 nd special Issue, p. 443).
March 2005	Between Guji and Gebra ethnic group	Twenty-four individuals died and ten were injured.	The adoption of 'sons-of-soil' orientations by regional states (HRC, 87 th special Issue, p. 514).
June 2005	Between Guji and Gebra ethnic groups	Sixteen people died; twenty-five people were injured; property estimated to be fifty-four thousand two hundred and fifty-five birr were destroyed.	A claim to have boundary enlargement (HRC, 87 th special Issue, p. 506).
August 2006	In Eastern Wollela, in Gidie Kirimu Woreda between Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups	Over one hundred people died and four people were injured.	Conflicts over 'autochthony', literally being 'sons of the soil', caused by the politicised mentality of the 'so-called' indigenous people (HRC, 98 th special Issue, p. 757).

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February 2007	In Oromia Regional State, Guji Zone, Bulie Hora Woreda, between Burji and Guji ethnic groups	Two people died; eight people were injured.	Claims on ethnic boundary (HRC, 111 th special Issue, p. 91).
October 2007	Adama University	One student was killed and five students injured; nineteen students were expelled from the University	Tribal identity has been politicised since EPRDF took power (HRC, 96 th special Issue, p. 736).
	Haromya University	Ten students were injured and thirty students were expelled from the University.	Tribal identity has been politicised since EPRDF took power (HRC, 96 th special Issue, p. 738).
	Jimma University	Around twenty students were jailed.	Tribal identity has been politicised since EPRDF took power (HRC, 96 th special Issue, p. 741).
May 2008	In Benishangul, between Gumiz and Oromo ethnic groups	Over one hundred people died; twenty-five injured and over one thousand people were displaced.	A claim to have agricultural areas (HRC, 110 th special Issue, p. 82).
March 2009	In Benishangul, between Gumiz and Oromo ethnic groups	Sixteen people died; twenty people were injured.	Claims on ethnic boundary (HRC, 27 th regular Issue, part two, p. 173).
May 2015	In SPNN, among Hamar, Kara and Arbolie ethnic groups	Seven people were killed and nine were injured.	Boundary dispute on water and agricultural land resources (HRC, 134 th special Issue, p. 3).

