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## Decoding Ethnic (Multi-National) Federalism: Its Influence on Conflict Dynamics and Sustainable Peace in Ethiopia

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### ABSTRACT

Since its introduction in Ethiopia, the benefits of ethnic federalism in addressing diversity, reducing tensions, and promoting sustainable peace have been debated. On the one hand, ethnic federalism recognizes the authority and right of ethnic groups and identities to self-governance. On the other hand, the country's federalism has given some ethnic groups a greater advantage over others, even though they have long coexisted in the area and consider themselves owners of the ethnic homeland. The main objective of the study is to examine the impact of ethnic federalism on conflict dynamics and sustainable peace in Ethiopia. Centripetalism theory was employed to examine the impact of ethnic federalism on conflict dynamics and sustainable peace in Ethiopia. A qualitative research approach with a descriptive case study was applied, and interview and document analysis were used to collect data. A purposive and convenience sampling technique was used to select the study participants. The collected data was analyzed thematically. Even though the study's finding shows mixed results, a significant majority of participants indicated that ethnic federalism has contributed to conflict and affected sustainable peace by exacerbating ethnic divisions, ethnic extremism, competitions among groups, and conflictual inter-regional relations, making some second-class citizens in a territory they consider their homeland. Hybrid federalism (a combination of both ethnic and civic elements) with emphasis on the people's agreement is recommended as Ethiopia's best government system.

### INTRODUCTION

The increase in civil wars and conflicts based on racial, religious and linguistic differences in recent years proves that the nature of conflicts has changed (Kaldor, 2012). In order to manage and resolve ethnocultural conflicts, new instruments have therefore had to be developed as a result of these "new wars" One such option is federalism, which grants minority groups (limited) power over their own economic, political and social affairs while maintaining the territorial integrity of the existing state (Anderson & Keil, 2017). Due to federalism's potential to facilitate the reconciliation of differences, protect minority groups, prevent territorial disintegration, and maintain political stability, it has become one of the preferred conflict resolution strategies of the international community, as the majority of violent conflicts are intra-state conflicts fought between different groups within a country (rather than between different countries) (Monteux, 2006).

Federalism implies the distribution of power across the various levels of government, with sets of principles ranging from checks and balances to the separation of powers, with some guarantee of such autonomy of each level of government in its own sphere (Riker, 1964; Clark, 2000). Federalism can take different shapes and forms. In fact, many forms of federalism have been mentioned, and one certainly is ethnic federalism. Nicole Herther-Spiro defines ethnic federalism as "an attempt to create a territorial solution to ethnic conflict by acknowledging the need to grant some degree of autonomy to ethnic

groups within a state but attempts to do so without complete secession of one group or another from the state" (Herther-Spiro, 2007).

African federalism is linked to the colonial practice of "divide and rule". This means that federalism can have different meanings in different contexts depending on cultural and historical connotations. In the administration of their colonies in Africa during colonialism, colonial rulers in Africa used a unitary form of government (Assefa, 2007). In some African colonies, the British attempted to impose federalism. However, African nationalists and anti-colonial leaders vehemently resisted the British efforts as they saw it as a continuation of "divide and rule" under a different guise. On this terrain, nationalist activists opposed decentralization, including Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. After gaining independence, the new African rulers opted for unity government (Agbu, 2004). African leaders preferred the establishment of unitary states to federalism. Most nations in Africa today are unitary states with centralized political authority (Kimenyi, 1998). Currently, many African politicians are unwilling to consider federalism because they fear that it would strengthen nationalism. According to Elaigwu (1994), post-colonial African authorities saw federalism as an instrument for escalating crises rather than as a means of crisis management.

Each country's federal system of government is the result of a unique political and historical process. In the case of Ethiopia, the "federal restructuring" of the nation

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is related to the problem of a failed attempt at nation-building through centralization in previous political structures (Kefale, 2013). Therefore, the introduction of federalism in Ethiopia in 1995 was motivated by the problem of creating a viable state structure that could be used as a tool for managing the country's complex ethno-linguistic diversity, thereby minimizing conflict (ibid.). However, ethnic disputes continue to pose significant obstacles throughout the country.

Ethnic federalism (a structure primarily designed on the basis of ethnicity) has been recommended for decades as a means of resolving ethnic conflict and separatism in polarized societies. However, two opposing viewpoints can be seen in the debates on ethnic federalism. On the one hand, many scholars support the use of ethnic autonomy as a means of resolving inter-ethnic disputes. Most scholars in favor of ethnic federalism argue that federalism is a tool for managing ethnic conflicts rather than fueling them or creating new conflicts. For example, according to Agnew (1995), ethnic federalism helps to manage inter-group disputes that might otherwise degenerate into violence and lead to numerous weak mini-states.

The studies on the impact of Ethiopian federalism on conflict management have produced polarized results. Specifically, contemporary scholars are highly supportive of multinational federalism, albeit with reservations (Hechter, 1998; Kymlicka, 2006; Watts, 1998). On the other side of the debate, some scholars (Nordlinger, 1972; Lipset, 1983) reject or rule out federalism (especially ethnic federalism) in highly divided societies because it represents a chasm that will eventually lead to secession and division. They claim that the self-aggrandizement and undivided interests of ethnic groups are strengthened rather than weakened by sovereignty.

Consequently, two opposing viewpoints can be seen in the debates on ethnic federalism. On the one hand, many scholars support the use of ethnic autonomy as a means of resolving inter-ethnic disputes. Most scholars in favor of ethnic federalism argue that federalism is a tool for managing ethnic conflicts rather than fueling them or creating new conflicts. For example, according to Agnew (1995), ethnic federalism helps to manage inter-group disputes that might otherwise degenerate into violence and lead to numerous weak mini-states.

Similarly, David & Donald (2008) argue that ethnic autonomy can contribute to resolving political disputes. The elites in the political center can strengthen the confidence of local leaders by granting some degree of autonomy to local and regional authorities (Abrha, 2019). According to Andreas (2003), Ethiopia's ethnic minorities, which were underrepresented in the past, are now represented at central and regional levels. According to Horowitz (2000), ethnic federalism can also be used to reduce interethnic conflict by increasing the number of centers of power and promoting interethnic cooperation in the electoral process and alignment of common interests.

On the other hand, scholars have claimed that ethnic federalism accelerates secession, suppresses individual rights and exacerbates and inflames ethnic conflicts, ultimately leading to the disintegration of nations (Martinez, 2010; Egwe, 2003; Mamdani, 2005; Nyong'o, 2002), which is contrary to the optimistic views expressed above on the role of ethnic federalism in reducing ethnic conflicts. According to Ottaway (1994), ethnic-based federalism reduces ethnic hostilities while escalating interethnic conflicts. In addition, some suggest that ethnic federalism does not help reduce ethnic conflicts. They argue that the political and economic powers that come with ethnic federalism influence ethnic federal states to pass laws and take actions that discriminate against other ethnic groups. Although this is partly because of the nature of ethnic federalism, in giving power for ethnic political elites that prioritize group-focused self-interests, certain conflicts could also emerge because of the emergence of competition between ethnic groups to control power within the central government and its decision-making processes (Sambanis & Shayo, 2013; Ciepley 2013).

Furthermore, some also argue that such economic and political empowerment of ethnic groups could further induce secessionist agendas by some ethnic groups, potentially leading to instability and ethnic strife with those ethnic groups seeking national unity. Affirming the notion that ethnic federalism encourages secessionist conflicts, some also further mention that, in cases such as that of Indonesia, which has linguistically, ethnically, and religiously fragmented societies, their citizens still have anti-federalism views because of their memory of secessionist ethnic conflicts at the end of the Dutch colonial rule and the violence that emerged when federalism was first put to the test (Erk & Anderson, 2009).

These general theoretical positions are also reflected in the normative discussions on Ethiopian federalism. In what is seen as a reversal of previous doctrine, Ethiopia began boldly adopting ethnicity in politics and ethnic federalism in 1995. Many people found this federal concept attractive because it could manage diversity while controlling inter-ethnic tensions. Despite its pioneering achievements, the federal system has also generated ethnic animosities and rival ethnic nationalism, especially within sub-national units (Turton, 2006). The politicization and ethnic mobilization of political leaders has also contributed significantly to the spread of ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. As a result, ethnic clashes have occurred in several places across the country, including in public universities, especially after 1995. As a result, ethnic disputes and violence continue to occur throughout the country (Admasu, 2019). Therefore, the main objective of the study is to examine the impact of ethnic-based federalism on conflict dynamics and sustainable peace in the whole country considering the experience of Ethiopia.

## Theoretical Framework

### Centripetalism Theory

As developed and defended by Donald L. Horowitz, Centripetalism is considered a novel strategy for shaping political institutions to mitigate this sense of exclusion. According to Horowitz (1985), centripetalism is considered a type of political system for a multisegmental, especially multiethnic, country that creates cross-segmental divisions among members of the political elite through inclusive and moderate political behavior that transcends group interests, depoliticizes segmental divisions, and in this way reduces their importance. One of the central institutions of centripetalism is decentralization, which divides large segments into smaller parts that inhabit different, ideally multisegmental regions, thus inducing the regional political elites of the different segments to cooperate. So, Centripetalism, like sociationalism, is a model for a political system of power-sharing attributed to certain multisegmental, especially multiethnic, countries such as Nigeria and Indonesia (Reilly, 2012).

It aims for members of different ethnic/national/religious/confessional/linguistic segments to share power, but not as part of specific institutions that protect and strengthen the interests of individual segments (as is the case with consociationalism), but in the dimension of supra- or inter-segmental institutions, i.e., institutions that are open to people from all segments. Such an approach aims to create inclusive and moderate political behavior among members of the political elite that transcends group interests to depoliticize segmentary divisions and thus reduce their importance (Reilly, 2007, 2012). Thus, contrary to sociationalism, centripetalism does not promote the institutional recognition of segmentary differences and interests. On the contrary, the essence of centripetalism is to promote cooperation not so much between segments but between members of different segments, even forcing them to cooperate *sui generis* by creating an integrative institutional framework. The most important formal centripetal institutions include (Reilly, 2012; Trzcíński, 2018).

First, cross-regional and cross-segment parties and, where appropriate, coalitions between them; second, the election of a cross-segment president (supported by members of different segments) through the application of the so-called territorial vote allocation requirement, i.e. the requirement to obtain a correspondingly large number of votes in the presidential elections in the majority of states or provinces (the fulfillment of this requirement is indispensable to occupy the office of president, and the mere achievement of a numerical majority of votes is not sufficient) (Trzcíński, 2017); Third, the use of electoral systems that encourage cross-segment voting, especially a preferential vote in the form of an alternative vote in single-mandate districts or a single transferable vote in multi-mandate districts, or some other type of cross-segment vote aggregation (Reilly, 2020). Fourth, decentralization (e.g., in the form of federalization),

which leads to the division of large segments into smaller parts inhabiting different, ideally multi-segmental states, prompting the regional political elites of the different segments to work together.

Moreover, centripetalism is associated with institutions that encourage the pooling of votes. “In direct contrast to the recommendations of sociologists, centripetalists argue that the best way to manage democracy in divided societies is not to replicate existing ethnic divisions in legislatures and other representative bodies but rather to depoliticize ethnicity by creating institutional incentives for cross-ethnic voting to encourage some degree of agreement among rival groups,” writes Reilly (2012), himself a leading centripetalist.

Centripetal approaches to managing ethnic conflict aim to promote interethnic understanding and moderation by making politicians dependent on electoral support from groups other than their base (Reilly, 2018). Proponents argue that electoral rules that reward politicians who seek cross-community support can promote more moderate and centrist policies and outcomes in polarized situations than pure plurality or proportional representation systems. The logic is simple enough: under conditions of electoral uncertainty, office-seeking politicians who are offered institutional incentives to win additional votes from non-core supporters have an incentive to moderate their political rhetoric and broaden their policy positions to win potential voter support (Horowitz, 1985). In short, this approach helps to promote national identity and government effectiveness.

However, just like consociationalism, centripetalism also has points of criticism and disadvantages. One of the main problems with the theory is the lack of empirical evidence for the effectiveness of centripetalism (Bogaards, 2019). Centripetalist institutions do not work in electoral systems with homogeneous constituencies, as politicians, in these cases; have no incentives to form multi-ethnic parties as they do not need to appeal to voters outside their group. Some evidence suggests that centripetal institutions lead to more instability and extremism (McCulloch, 2013). McCulloch (2013) also claims that strong proponents of consociationalism argue that centripetalism does not provide sufficient representation guarantees because groups want representation and not indirect influence on majority decisions. O’Leary (2013) also notes that centripetal institutions that aggregate votes unfairly privilege the majority or largest group; politicians from such groups need to aggregate fewer votes to win office than politicians from smaller groups. McGarry (2019) also criticizes that centripetalism tends to exclude hardliners from the political system, which polarizes the political environment and makes it impossible for moderates in government to compromise. The moderates thus become hardliners.

To sum up, the theory of centripetalism presents us with a useful vantage point on fostering social cohesion and national integration in pluralist societies. Centripetalism emphasizes shared identities, common values, and

inclusive institutions to assuage ethnic/religious/cultural divisions while promoting a societal sentiment of belongingness. The theory responded to the desire to establish a common national story and participate in integrative (inclusive) nation-building. As the world's societies grapple with diversity-related tensions, centripetalism offers a theoretical and practical basis for encouraging social integration while advancing inclusive citizenship that binds diverse nations through intrastate relationships. That is to say, centripetalism integrates (i.e., reduces the differences) between members' segments, making them part-ends-to-a-whole. This theory can be used potently in the example of Ethiopia, where a multi-ethnic religious state must integrate between different societal sectors.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted in Ethiopia. Ethiopia has been a sovereign state in Africa for a very long time, dating back to the emergence of the Aksumite Empire in 400 BC. It is a country that has maintained its independence and has never been colonised by any foreign power (Berhane & Tefera, 2018). It is located in the Horn of Africa and borders Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, and Eritrea. With almost 110 million inhabitants, Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa (Dadi, 2022). With more than 80 different ethnic groups, it is a country with enormous linguistic, cultural and religious diversity (Eresso, 2021). After the introduction of the federal government in 1995, nine regional states were created based on ethnicity and two administrative states (Tesfay *et al.*, 2012). Now the number of regional states has increased to twelve. Ethiopia has a total area of 1,100,000 square kilometres (420,000 square miles). Agriculture is the country's largest economic sector, accounting for 36% of Ethiopia's GDP.

A qualitative research approach was chosen for the study. The reason for choosing a qualitative research approach is that the conceptual issues to be investigated require holistic qualitative data and discussion. A qualitative study aims to understand human experiences from the perspective of those who actually live through them (Yegeedis, 1998). The goal of a qualitative study is to explore people's attitudes, behaviors, and experiences. It also strives to obtain a comprehensive response from the research participants (Dawson, 2009). The qualitative research method also allows the researchers to explore in depth the views, perspectives and experiences of the participants in relation to peace, conflict and federalism in the study area.

In this study, the research design was also adapted. The research design provides a guide for gathering the most information with the least amount of time and effort. Flexibility, appropriateness, parsimony, minimizing bias, and maximizing the reliability of the data are the standards for a sound research design. The nature of the research question being investigated also has an impact on good design (Kothari, 2004). Therefore, the

researchers used a case study research design. A case study, as further defined by Yin (2009), is an empirical investigation that explores an everyday event in the real world where the distinction between phenomenon and context is not clear. Case studies may involve one or more cases, and multi-case designs must follow replication logic rather than sampling logic.

The study also applied non-probability sampling methods, in particular purposive sampling and random sampling. Initially, the researcher used the purposive sampling technique to select study participants because it allows the researcher to select participants with a particular characteristic for the problem under study (Patton, 1990). Consequently, the purposive sampling technique was used to select participants from universities, political parties, government organizations such as the Ministry of Peace and the House of Federations, and members of parliament. Purposive sampling is a technique commonly used in qualitative research. It allows the researcher to carefully select participants who demonstrate a characteristic or process that they want to learn more about (Silverman, 2000). Participants in the study were selected based on their knowledge and experience of the topic under study, with the exception of those who were selected using the convenience sampling method. Therefore, three universities such as Addis Ababa University, Civil Service University and Bahirdar University were selected as the sample because they have extensive experience in research related to peace and security, political science and federalism in Ethiopia.

Secondly, the researcher also applied convenience sampling technique because it helps to include readily available participants who agree to participate in a study. This method is often referred to as random sampling (Nealy & Sue, 1999). Furthermore, as this is a broad, sensitive and political topic, it may be difficult to reach all regions of the country using other probability methods. Therefore, the researcher chose convenience sample to select volunteer participants who were close to the researcher to solve the sample representation problem. Therefore, the participants from Addis Ababa were selected because Addis Ababa is the capital of the country. The researcher believed that this could cover the perspectives of various ethnic groups as all ethnic groups live in the city. Finally, the number of research participants who were interviewed was determined according to the principle of data saturation. Data saturation is a principle for determining sample size in qualitative research that is based on redundancy of information (Charmaz, 2006). In other words, a qualitative researcher can stop interviewing research participants if no new information is found during the course of data collection.

Both primary and secondary data sources were collected in this study. Primary data was collected through interviews, while secondary sources were analyzed from relevant literature, dissertations, these and other documents. Interviews and document analysis were used as data collection instruments. Semi-structured interviews were

used as the interview format. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to explore responses, motivations and emotions, and a potential advantage is that non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and gestures can enhance the qualitative aspects of the data by being recorded (Jupp, 2006). Face-to-face interviews were conducted on the topic under investigation. The duration of each interview was between thirty minutes and one and a half hours.

The purpose of interviews, a qualitative research technique, is to learn about the interviewees' attitudes and perceptions of the topic under study (Yin, 2009). Therefore, university teachers, students and members of political parties were interviewed. And also Officials from Ministry of Peace and members of the Parliament and the House of Federation were key informants from whom data could be collected. Additionally, Federal and regional constitutions were reviewed here. In addition, reports from the Human Rights Commission, the Ethiopian Peace Observatory (EPO) and other international institutions such as the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) were consulted. The reason for this is that these documents and reports corroborate the data collected through interviews and are in fact more reliable reports from national and international institutions.

A thematic analysis technique was used to analyze the qualitative data. According to Creswell (2003), transcribing and reading through the data is the first and most important step in data analysis in qualitative studies. First, the data collected in Amharic was transcribed and translated into English. All notes and tape recordings of the interviews were transcribed accurately. After reading the interview transcriptions, work began on summarizing the data and sorting the content into themes. Subsequently, the categorization of the translated information was prepared case by case for analysis. The themes running through the data were then identified for discussion and analysis. After that, the themes were categorized according to the research objectives. After categorizing these themes in accordance with the research objectives, the results of the qualitative data were presented and analyzed. Finally, conclusions and suggestions are made based on the results of the study and the discussions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ethiopia was founded as a federal state, divided into two self-administrative cities (Addis Ababa & Dire Dawa) and nine regional states, now growing to twelve. The regional states are generally based on ethnic linguistics and primarily represent the majority of the respective ethnic community. The Ethiopian constitution came into force in August 1995 and provides the legal framework for the existing system of ethnic federalism (Bethke, 2021). This form of government aims to accommodate the country's different cultural, linguistic, and historical identities by granting autonomous zones to different ethnic groups.

On the one hand, ethnic federalism gave ethnic groups more autonomy and political decision-making power.

The creation of autonomous regional states along ethnic lines has decisively prevented the concentration of power and the political dominance of a single group or party (Interview, 3, 21 & 24). Ethnic federalism helps to reduce conflict between Ethiopia's various communities by allowing minority groups greater representation at local and national levels (Interview, 10). Greater autonomy over resource-related decision-making processes and improved communication between government agencies responsible for enforcing resource management policies are promoted by giving regional governments more control over resources such as land, water, energy, etc. (Interview, 23 & 39). One key informant commented as follows:

I think I have to take some things back. For example, there was the issue of equality, such as equality of ethnicity, religion, and status. It almost recognized them. We got to know a lot of people we did not know. We got to know many cultures. And it gave a place to different nationalities. The recognition helped them express and enrich their language and culture (Interview 14, August 4, 2023).

A few participants also believed that Ethnic federalism allows the nation to recognize and defend various ethnic identities. The different ethnic groups can preserve their cultural heritage and feel included when they are granted autonomy. Feeling valued and represented in politics, they experience greater social cohesion (Interview, 24 & 21). According to (Interviews 32, 26 & 44), the introduction of ethnic federalism also paves the way for promoting social justice and addressing the past questions of ethnic and cultural questions and concerns in the country. Therefore, few respondents stated that the ethnic federal structure has been important in managing diversity in the country since 1995.

However, the majority of participants stated that ethnic federalism has also exacerbated tensions and violence between ethnic groups. Distrust, hostility, violence, and tensions between different groups within society are exacerbated by ethnic federalism (Interview, 36 & 35). In addition, ethnic federalism fosters a sense of division between different social or ethnic groups, which in turn leads to violence. Rivalry over resources, political power, and recognition of territories and ethnic groupings has also led to conflict and even violence between different ethnic groups (Interview, 31). In addition, this informant claimed that the other major factor for conflict, rivalry, and violence in the country is the unclear administrative boundaries that lead to rivalries between ethnic groups for control and domination of territories and resources. Moreover, another key informant explained this as follows:

I do not see the current federal system adopted and implemented after 1995 as positive. Because the price of federalism based on ethnicity and language has not been easy for the last 28 years, and even today, as you and I sit here and talk, the price we are paying is the result of this federalism. So, federalism based on ethnicity is on

the verge of plunging the country into the abyss. And I am afraid if this federal system is not improved, Ethiopia will not come out of it, and it will be very stressful and worse still, we may end up in a problem that could lead to a massacre like Rwanda tomorrow (Interview 5, August 6, 2023).

The study found that although Ethiopia has twelve regions under its current regional structures, only four of them - the Gambela region, the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' region and two recently added regions - the Southwest Ethiopia Peoples' region and the Central Ethiopia region - are not named after a specific ethnic group. The regional names of the remaining eight regions - Oromo, Amhara, Afar, Tigray, Somali, Sidama, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Harari - are determined by ethnolinguistic factors. Despite the ethnic names given to these eight regions, they are home to millions of Ethiopians belonging to many ethnic groups and identities. Ethiopian identity and ethnicity have intermingled over many generations through marriage, economic migration, harvesting, etc.

As a result, ethnic federalism has come under fire since its conception and implementation because it seriously jeopardizes the geographical integrity of the state and the centuries-old, sustainable, peaceful coexistence of society. In particular, drawing boundaries along ethnic lines has intertwined ethnicity, territory, and intra-federal boundaries (Clapham, 2009). It has led to violent conflicts between different ethnic groups almost everywhere regional states border each other (Kefale, 2013). As a result, notable ethnic conflicts have emerged in Ethiopia since 1990s: the conflicts between the Silte and the Gurrage, the Wagagoda language, the Sheko and Megengir, the AnuakNuer, the Berta and Gumuz, the Gedeo-Guji, the Oromo-Amhara, the Afar-Somali (Issa clan) and the Oromo-Somali (Mengistu, 2015; Tadesse & Gelaw, 2013; ICG, 2009). The most important are the Amhara-Gumuz war (2018), the Wollega conflict 2019–2023, the Tigray crisis 2020, and the Amhara conflict recently.

One informant commented this as follows:

The administrative borders of the states are not clearly defined in the FDRE constitution. Article 46 stipulates how regions can be formed. As decisive criteria, it mentions settlement area, language, identity, history, etc.. However, what we see in practice is based on language and ethnicity. The biggest problem, however, is that the organized regions are not restructured according to the constitution. (Interview 30, September 11, 2023).

Similarly, the study found that implementing ethnic federalism has contradictory consequences for the security and sustainable peace of the country. The practice of ethnic federalism has weakened the age-old values of coexistence and created a conducive environment for ethnic confrontations and conflicts in the nation, which is also significant. It also created a hard ethnic border where administrative boundaries are used as political and ethnic differentiators, as in the case of the conflict between

Oromo and Somali over disputed borders and others. The institutionalization of ethnicity and territorial recognition enabled the emergence of a mindset of “ethnic equals and ethnic others,” made minorities in different regions the victims of politics and failed to provide them with effective means of accommodation, severely restricted people’s constitutional rights, such as the right to work and mobility, and revived secessionist tendencies.

Relations between individuals and ethnic groups have also suffered from ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. Inter-ethnic disputes, competition for resources and power, and the lack of a unified social fabric are the results and hinder the development of friendly relations between the different ethnic groups in Ethiopia. Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia also has a significant impact on national unity. The emphasis on regional autonomy and ethnic identity overshadowed Ethiopia’s national identity and unity or cohesion. The decentralization of power and resources has also led to regional inequalities and competition, further straining national cohesion. As a result, ethnic federalism has created new problems of ethnic tension and conflict throughout Ethiopia, even as it has resolved previous problems of ethnic inequality and injustice.

Moreover, following the introduction of ethnic-based political arrangements in 1995, inter-ethnic clashes, internal displacement, insecurity, and tensions have become a protracted problem for Ethiopia’s security and unity. Minorities, in particular, are victims of ethnic politics, and their socio-economic insecurity and marginalization are increasing from time to time, posing a challenge to peace and security. Moreover, non-territorial minorities are invisible in the political process, especially in most regional states (Kleppe, 2022). For instance, Ethiopia has witnessed several significant ethnic conflicts since 1995, which have been exacerbated by the introduction of ethnic federalism and ethnicity-based politics in the country.

Furthermore, there have been numerous internal displacements in Ethiopia after 1995 as a result of the interaction between ethnic federalism and violence. The displaced people have faced obstacles such as loss of livelihood, access to essential services, and concerns about their safety. According to UNHCR 2023, the number of internally displaced persons reaches around 4.3 million by 2023, the highest number in the world. The number of internally displaced persons has been increasing from time to time due to conflicts occurring in different parts of the country, such as the Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, and others. Humanitarian crises, including widespread displacement and significant numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs), are occurring as a result of the ongoing hostilities and instability.

According to the study participants, the Ethiopian Constitution of 1995 gave considerable power to the regional constitutions, which have important implications for displacement and conflict. The power to administer land and natural resources is vested in the regional states by the constitution. However, the applicability of

constitutional provisions— particularly those relating to ethnic nationalism and the right to secession — has been called into question in light of recent conflicts (Interview, 18). Maintaining equality, security, and harmony among citizens and protecting dispersed minorities has become more difficult with adopting regional constitutions (Interview, 19). Here the constitutions of Benishangul Gumuz and Oromia region are the best examples.

Furthermore, Ethiopia's constitutional version of ethnic federalism — which emphasizes nations, nationalities, and peoples — as well as the formation of states based solely on ethnic boundaries and the use of ethnicity as a precondition for political participation— has increased ethnic conflict, instability and the rise of secessionist movements. In this regard, Turton (2006) notes that the federal re-division of Ethiopia along ethnic lines has not reduced but rather exacerbated inter-ethnic conflict by imposing a fixed ethnic-territorial grid on a population that has long been mobile and moving within the country. The demarcation of Ethiopia's federal units has also resulted in a number of regional states with ethnic heterogeneity within their borders and several states where the struggle for regional supremacy between different ethnic groups or clans has weakened and destabilized regional governments.

Moreover, the demarcation of regional states based on the dominant ethnic groups created various minority ethnic groups, which are considered a lifelong second-class citizen with no political representation. As a result, ethnic cleansing and acts of violence against ethnic minorities occurred throughout the country, including in the regional states of Benishangul Gumuz and Oromia. Establishing federal units and administrative institutions leads to problems and conflicts, whether symmetrical or asymmetrical.

According to Bélair (2016), ethnic federalism has also contributed significantly to the emergence and development of local and regional ethnic conflicts in many areas, including Somalia and Beni-Shangul Gumuz. Interestingly, one informant claims that the homogeneity of Somali ethnicity has not prevented the outbreak of conflicts; rather, federalism has increased the politicization of clan ties, which has facilitated the emergence of violent conflicts. He identifies primary conflict patterns in Benishangul-Gumuz, a region characterized by ethnic heterogeneity: conflicts between titular groups and conflicts between titular and non-titular communities. According to Bélair, the latter trend is particularly worrying because it has led to the political marginalization of non-titular groups. His findings on intra-regional dynamics coincide with those of Aalen (2002); ethnic federalism has created a dynamic of ethnic differentiation in which disputes arise from competing claims to political legitimacy and revolve around access to political and economic resources.

Additionally, the system is also highly hindered by the freedom of movement of the people in the country, which Basta (2000) also stated. The study also found that

Ethiopia's ethnic federal structure impedes the right to freedom of movement and residence because the ruling government employed a divide-and-conquer strategy to promote ethnic federalism, and the federal government failed to uphold the rights enshrined in the constitution. One factor in the federal government's inability to defend the rights of the people is the formation of regional special security forces known as "Liyu Hail," organized by the names of each region (Admassu, 2022).

One informant commented as follows:

'For me, the provincial laws, especially some, contradict the federal laws. For example, in the federal constitution, everyone has the right to move from place to place and create wealth (Article 36). However, in the Benishangul Regional State Constitution, for example, only certain ethnic groups are named as owners of the region. This means that the other groups have no place in this region, which greatly affects the right to move freely from one place to another (Interview, 19, September 19, 2023).

Some participants also pointed to the institutional and geographical basis that federalism provides to groups supporting ethno-nationalism. For example, one source claimed that territorial autonomy and federalism give ethno-nationalist movements' borders, group identity, cohesion, administration, parliament, leadership, and outside support - all of which provide comprehensive support for secession. Thus, instead of addressing ancient grievances, the current federal structure has inflamed any new local tension and allowed its citizenry to place precedence on their identity over that of unity (Fiseha, 2009). The current difficulties ultimately yield discrimination on identity and ethnicity, fostered by undemocratic political mobilization through the protection of race-ethnic groups. Accordingly, the outcome of this resulted in unrest among different ethnic groups within such a diverse region that led mainland Ethiopia to violence-related killings and massive population displacement (Yeshiw, 2018).

Ethiopia's ethnic federal system has facilitated the organization of ethnic groups and the promotion of their identity over the past thirty years. However, all this comes at the cost of losing the common Ethiopian identity. Shared values such as humanity, culture, and history gradually disappear (Mengie, 2015). Since 1995, the new political arrangement has focused exclusively on building and promoting ethnic identity at the expense of common norms and values shared by Ethiopian society, in stark contrast to previous attempts to create an Ethiopian identity that sidelined ethnic identity (Bayu, 2022). Instead of promoting unity between communities and identities and focusing on societal norms, the system deliberately manipulated pre-existing linguistic-cultural differences. As a result, some groups began to develop their identities and ideals in ways that threatened the identities and existence of others.

The study's findings also showed that Ethnic federal arrangement highly influenced the political dynamics in the country. Political parties are mostly organized along



ethnic lines, and the majority of the political parties registered are ethnic political parties. This has resulted in the rise of ethnic chauvinism over national interest, inflated and unhealthy antagonisms, ethnically nationalist movements or party-political structures, as well as inter-ethnic strife, which made nation-building very difficult to build a consensus among its citizens on what decisions they would want to be taken at country-level. Similarly, Lyons (2019) suggests that the ethnicization of politics has undermined efforts at forging a common national identity, enabling political instability and violence to persist. These are the parties that most often seem to be engaging in political crises and clashing violently as they compete for control of both local and federal power.

Although the proponents of ethnic federalism claimed that it had created nine regional governments according to ethnicity, most regional states still have many ethnic groups living in them. To meet the demands of ethnic groups, a different political arrangement is needed at the regional level, but this is a difficult process. For example, some regional states have divided ethnic groups into two categories in their constitutions: Titular Property Owners and Non-Titular Property Owners. In such regional states, ethnic conflicts with fatal consequences are caused by the competing claims and counter-claims of titular and non-titular ethnic groups. According to Habtu (2003), the new government structure has led to formerly dominant and dominated ethnic groups being forced to forge new inter-ethnic relationships, which in turn exacerbates ethnic conflicts, empirical examples of this are Agew and Gumuz (Ayenew, 2018) and Guji and Gedeo. Inter-ethnic disputes also arise from conflictual interactions between the majority and minority ethnic groups.

A renewed emphasis on ‘ethno-territoriality,’ which means territory for particular ethnic groups, also led to territorial disputes and the deepening of identity-based segmentation. The ethnic-territorial structure has made the minority groups feel left out and leaves them more aggrieved than ever, as a result of which they continue doing violence. This structure sabotaged all efforts to adapt societal harmony and sustainable peace by opening the way for an endless flux of power competition, inter-group versus resources. One informant also explained the impact of ethno-territoriality as follows:

Borders and land are defined in the name of ethnic identity. I think this is one of the reasons why conflicts and instability are increasing. Conflicts and controversies exist between the Amhara and Tigray regions over the Wolkayt and Raya areas. There is also a problem in Benishangul and Oromia regions. The same applies to the conflicts between Somali and Afar, Somali and Oromia, and others, including the issue and claims to the city of Addis Ababa. Therefore, ethnic territoriality (linking territorial boundaries with ethnic identities) has greatly affected the peace and stability of the country (Interview 4, August 7, 2023).

The study’s results show that internal minorities are routinely excluded from social, political, and economic

spheres. Therefore, the findings may be relevant for both federal and regional governments to ensure that Ethiopia’s federal structure is appropriate for protecting the country’s internal minorities. First, the regional constitution and all related ordinances should be amended to protect the interests of minorities in the area adequately. Secondly, the local, regional, and federal governments should focus on integrating the population by utilizing various opportunities, such as public discourses and popular festivals, as mistrust and tensions between the ethnic groups in the area are to be expected. Thirdly, the federal or regional government should establish a special institution to protect minorities, which aims to promote intercultural relations between the different ethnic groups.

The conflicts in the country are of different types: titular and non-titular conflicts, resource conflicts, identity conflicts - ethnic, religious, and linguistic, political/power conflicts/political violence, intra-federation/border conflicts, inter-ethnic tensions, etc. All these conflicts have had chronic social, economic, and political consequences, such as loss of lives, displacement, poverty, and emotional and psychological damage, especially for the refugees. Most importantly, the conflict dynamics have had a serious negative impact on Ethiopia’s economy. Conflict and war affect freedom of movement, trade, investment, property loss, and infrastructure destruction. Socially, the conflict has also severely affected social cohesion and trust, as divisions along ethnic lines have increased mistrust and hatred. Thus, the introduction to ethnic federalism has its role for the dynamics of conflicts and the effort of building sustainable peace is affected.

Moreover, despite being intended to give various ethnic groups autonomy and representation, ethnic activists have frequently taken advantage of ethnic federalism to further discriminatory agendas and widen rifts within the nation. These activists portray other ethnic groups as threats to their identity, wealth, or political power in order to inflame intergroup tensions within the framework of ethnic federalism. They exacerbate a vicious cycle of distrust and hostility by feeding such tales, undermining the social fabric and endangering peace. Ethnic federalism in this situation serves to reinforce ethnocentric politics, further polarize communities along ethnic lines, and increase the likelihood of conflict rather than promoting national unity and collaboration.

Furthermore, ethnic federalism’s lack of accountability fosters an atmosphere of impunity in which people and organizations that use divisive language or even call for violence frequently escape punishment. Because of the system’s emphasis on ethnic autonomy, activists and political leaders can occasionally get away with it by claiming that they are defending the interests of their ethnic community. Because of this climate of impunity, criminals feel more free to carry out their crimes without worrying about facing consequences from the law. Because of this, ethnic rivalries cause tensions to rise uncontrolled, which makes it harder to uphold the law and

preserve long-term peace and stability in a community divided along ethnic lines.

To sum up, the following mixed results are revealed based on the interview and document analysis. First, the results of the study show that a significant majority of participants believe that ethnic federalism has contributed to conflict and severely affected sustainable peace by placing a high value on ethnicity and leading to ethnic extremism across the country. Ethnic federalism has contributed to conflict and has affected sustainable peace by exacerbating ethnic divisions, ethnic extremism, inter-group competition, and conflictual inter-regional relations; making some second-class citizens in an area they consider their homeland. Second, the ideas of some participants should not be underestimated. For some participants, ethnic federalism is not the only factor that affects sustainable peace in the country. Rather, the most important factors include weak institutions, poor governance, unfinished nation-building, unfair representation, competition for power and resources, historical narratives, and external factors. Third, a few other participants agree that ethnic federalism is not a problem but is implemented ineffectively at all levels.

## CONCLUSION

Ethnic federalism has been introduced in a few countries, but many have abandoned it due to its potential for fragmentation and weakening the country. Ethiopia is the only African country that has adopted ethnic federalism to address ethnic issues and bring peace and unity since the 1990s. The results of the study are mixed results. On the one hand, the results of the study show that a significant majority of participants believe that ethnic federalism has contributed to conflict and severely affected sustainable peace, as it places a high value on ethnicity and leads to ethnic extremism across the country. Ethnic federalism has contributed to conflict and impaired sustainable peace by exacerbating ethnic divisions, ethnic extremism, inter-group competition, and conflictual inter-regional relations, making some second-class citizens in an area they consider their homeland.

On the other hand, the ideas of some participants should not be underestimated. According to some participants, ethnic federalism is not the only cause of conflict in Ethiopia; historical narratives, unequal resources, power rivalry, and external factors are the main causes. Few respondents agree that ethnic federalism is not the cause of conflict and instability but rather a lack of proper implementation. The majority of respondents, therefore, believe it is dangerous if the government does not change its structure. It threatens the existence of the government and the state. Finally, the study suggests Ethiopia's federal structure should adopt a hybrid federalism model, considering civic and ethnic elements and individual rights. This model should include a cultural federal state, a civic federal state with a presidential system, and a Senate and House of Representatives. Ethnic federalism should have been reinforced with also centripetalism theory,

which allows inter-ethnic interactions. Strengthening local peace-building and national dialogue, led by an independent commission, is also recommended.

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