

**Federalism and Self-determination in a Multicultural Context: The Challenges
of the Ethiopian Experiment**

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Introduction

There are two politically sensitive radical policies in the 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution: ethnic federalism and the right to Self-determination including secession. They were meant to recognize the multiethnic aspect of the country, which has enjoyed little or no recognition ever since the birth of modern Ethiopian state by the end of the 19th Century. It also marks the recognition of ethnic identity as a basis of political decision-making. Accordingly, the notion of "nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia" has been introduced in to the Ethiopian politico-legal culture to represent ethnic identity. What is more, the right to self-determination (including secession) of these nations, nationalities and peoples has been guaranteed in the constitution. There is logical nexus between the two radical policies. The federal arrangement, which primarily bases itself on ethnicity, is designed to pave the way for the exercise of the right to self-determination of the various ethnic and linguistic groups. The net effect of the two radical policies was perceived to be an antidote to ethnic conflicts and bring about a lasting peace through recognition of the historically denied notion of ethnic identity. The process of adoption of the federal state based on ethnic identity and the recognition of the right to self-determination up to secession did not happen haphazardly. It was rather the result of social and political movements that started in the mid 20th century. It was particularly constructed as an antithesis to policies of assimilation, centralization and marginalization of ethnic minorities pursued by the preexisting regimes.

The Ethiopian federalism, along with its overriding principle of self-determination, has survived for over a decade. Nonetheless, its relative success is largely attributed to the existence of a dominant political party that has controlled power at both federal level and that of the regional states. As a unique and emerging model, the Ethiopian experiment has

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serious challenges. The viability of the Ethiopian experiment is contingent upon its capability to successfully overcome these challenges. The main aim of this short essay is therefore to analyze how federalism and the right to self-determination have been adopted in to formal language in Ethiopia and point out the major challenges facing the Ethiopian federalism. The first part of the essay discusses the process of construction of ethnic identity and the right to self-determination in Ethiopia by making a historical analysis. The second part deals with the nature of ethnic federalism and the right to self-determination up to secession in Ethiopia. Then, the major challenges of the Ethiopian federal model will be analyzed. Finally, certain concluding remarks will be made based on the analysis.

I. The Construction of Ethnic identity in Ethiopia

1.1. Ethnicity

Ethnicity as an analytical concept entered the intellectual arena in the middle of the 20th century. Since then ethnicity has become one of the buzzwords in intellectual and political discourse. Many politicians and scholars started to use ethnicity as a basis to political mobilization.¹ However, ethnicity, which denotes a complex human behavior, is a notion that defies single and comprehensive definition.² The dynamic nature of the concept along with its complex manifestations makes it difficult to define ethnicity. Consequently, the intellectual discourse on ethnicity has largely been marred by enduring debates, like the one between primordialists and instrumentalists. Clifford Greetz, the leading advocate of Primordialism, believes that ethnicity is the result of some natural givens that determine the collective identity of a group.³ These primordial ties, among others, include: kinship, language, race, ethnicity, religion, etc. The other school of thought, instrumentalism, maintains that ethnicity is not a given one; it is rather the result

¹ Mohammed, Salih and John Markakis, *Ethnicity and State in Eastern Africa*, (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 1998), 7

² Sarah Vaughan, *Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia*, (The University of Edinburgh, Unpublished PhD thesis, 2003), 40

³ Clifford Greetz, *Old States and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Africa and Asia*, (New York: Free Press, 1953), 109-111

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of social or political construction.⁴ Particularly, from an African perspective, constructivists argue that ethnicity has been constructed by the colonial powers as an instrument of their policy of "divide and rule".⁵ Instrumentalists emphasize the role political elites play in constructing ethnic identity as a basis to political mobilization in the postcolonial societies. However, it is worthwhile to note that none of these two theories can exclusively account for ethnicity. It is neither entirely primordial, nor utterly instrumental.⁶ Ethnicity has traits like language, kinship, common ancestor or religion, which are givens to the individual. However, these traits have all been constructed in the course of time by the group, which the individual perceives himself to belong. The creation of ethnic boundary for the purpose of economic and political mobilization is often constructed in the course of time. Ethnicity, as a notion, is therefore a social construct based on certain social givens. It is also worthy of note that ethnic identity, which is a self-perception or identification by an individual or a group, is different from politicized ethnicity, which is basically constructed.

An ethnic group refers to a "self-perceived inclusion of those who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by others with whom they are in contact".⁷ Such traditions typically include "folk" religious beliefs and practices, language, a sense of historical continuity and common ancestry or place of origin.⁸ There are certain factors to be taken account of while defining ethnicity. These are: racial uniqueness, territoriality, economic factors, religion, aesthetic cultural patterns and language.⁹ Some sort of genetically inherited differences, real or imagined, is part of the identity of many groups. Apart from the self-identification or perception, there should also be acceptance by others as belonging to a specific group. There are increasing demands by ethnic groups for recognition of ethnic

⁴ Brass, *Ethnicity and nationalism: Theory and comparison* (1991) 8

⁵ Johnston, A. *Ethnic Conflict in Post Cold War Africa: Four Case Studies (Rwanda, Liberia, Somalia and Kwanzulu-Natal)* (1998), 137

⁶ Solomon Ayele, *Institutionalizing the Right to Self-determination as a Human Rights Solution to Problems of Ethnic Conflict in Africa: The Case of Ethiopia and South-Africa*, (University of Pretoria, South Africa, 2004), 5

⁷ Romanuicci-Ross and George, *Ethnic Identity: Creation, Conflict and Accommodation*. (Altamira: London, New Delhi, 1995), 18

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

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distinctiveness, which sometimes have led to bloody conflicts. If we are to make a contrast between the pre and post WWII period conflicts, the post WWII conflicts are intrastate rather than the traditional inter-state conflicts which characterize the pre WWII time. Most intra-state conflicts are the result of either claims for recognition of certain level of distinctiveness or ethnic domination as in the case of Rwanda, Yugoslavia, Ethiopia, Sudan, etc. Hylland Erikson argues that 35 of the 37 bloody armed conflicts in the world in 1991 were internal conflicts, which could be described as “ethnic conflicts”.¹⁰ This is a clear indication that failure to recognize and accommodate ethnic identifications may lead to bloody wars. However, caution must be had that ethnic diversity does not in any way presuppose ethnic conflict. Ethnic conflicts are often a reflection of mismanagement of ethnic diversity or the outcome of politicized ethnicity and over fixation on ethnic differences.

1.2. Ethnic Identity in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is an ancient state with a three millennia history of statehood. However, the ancient state of Ethiopia represents the historically dominant *Abyssinians*¹¹. The Ethiopian state took its modern shape by the end of the 19thc. The modern Ethiopian state formation was a blender of successful diplomacy and force by Emperor *Menelik II*.¹² In some areas tribal leaders agreed to subordinate themselves under emperor *Menilik* and they avoided invasion by *Abyssinian* army. In areas where Emperor *Menilik* met fierce resistance, he brutally subjugated the people under slavery as in the case of *Kaffa* people in the Southern Ethiopia. The net effect of the process of state formation put various linguistic, cultural and religious groups under the newly created state of Ethiopia. Ethiopia is now a multiethnic state where more than 80 linguistic and ethnic groups live. Despite its multiethnic composition, the history of modern Ethiopian state has largely been characterized by ethnic domination, assimilation and marginalization. Ethnicity was an existing fact, which had been denied proper recognition in the Ethiopian past. Since the

¹⁰ Thomas Hylland Erikson, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, 2nded. London: Pluto Press 2002), 2

¹¹ “Abyssinia” historically refers to the orthodox Christian Amhara and Tigrian culture of the today's Northern Ethiopia, which represents the core of the historic Ethiopian state.

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creation of modern Ethiopia, the policies of the governments of *Menelik II*, *Haileselassie I* and Colonel *Mengistu Hailemariam* advocated a centralized unitary rule. Emperor *Menelik II* (1889 -1913) and Emperor *Haileselassie I* (1930-1974) attempted to forge cultural homogenization through policies of assimilation, centralization and one language policy. This policy of assimilation was part of the nation-building project. This social engineering process was adopted by the then dominant “*Amhara elites*” and they attempted to forge a unitary state based on ethnic assimilation, using Amharic language as a sole means of instruction and the Ethiopian Orthodox church as a core culture of national identity.¹³ Emperor *Haileselassie I* consolidated the process of centralization and institutionalized the process of homogenization by enacting the first written constitution of the country in 1931. The 1931 constitution effectively centralized state power within the hands of the emperor by deposing traditional rulers of the various regions. The process of centralization led to the subjugation of various linguistic, cultural and religious groups under the rule of the dominant *Amharas*.

Ethnic and cultural discontent of the marginalized and dominated groups led to the 1974 Revolution, which overthrew emperor *Haileselassie I* from power. Nonetheless, in the absence of an organized political group, the army took advantage of the political vacuum and controlled political power. The 1974 revolution was basically the result of Students Movement of the 1960's. Influenced by leftist doctrines, students of Addis Ababa University brought forward the issue of “National Question”. Besides, the idea of right of “nations, Nationalities and Peoples” to self-determination had also dominated the political agenda of the Students Movement. The Student Movements represented a defining period in the political construction of ethnic identity by articulating the issue of “National Question” and introducing the notion of “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” to signify ethnic identity, which had dominated the political discourse in the subsequent decades. However, the Students Movement itself was divided on the issue of “National Question”. Some groups started to contend that the issue that needs to be addressed in the Ethiopian

¹² Sarah Vaughan, 16

¹³ Alem Habtu, *Multiethnic Federalism in Ethiopia: A Study of the Secession Clause in the Constitution*, (Addis Ababa: Ethiopia, 2003), 10

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politics is the idea of class struggle, not “National Question”. This debate led to birth of Ethno-nationalist (ethnic based movements) and Pan-Ethiopianist (Class based movements) political groups.¹⁴ The ethno-nationalists claim that the Ethiopian state is an exclusionist one and the oppressed and marginalized groups need to have the right to self-determination to the extent of secession. An extreme version of the Ethno-nationalist groups is represented by the OLF, which claims that Ethiopia is a colonial empire.¹⁵ The Ethiopian state had colonized various ethnic groups in the South, Southwest and Eastern Ethiopia at a parallel time to the Scramble of Africa by the West. Hence, they conclude that Ethiopia, just like any western colonial empire, needs to undergo decolonization. At the other extreme, Pan-Ethiopian groups, represented by the *Amhara* elites, argue that history of Ethiopian state dates back to some three millennia years ago. They contend that the state existed for millennia successfully countering ethnic and regional challenges and forging a distinct national identity. They further argue that Ethiopia is a melting pot and a nation state, not a colonial empire. Donald Levin views the process of creating the Ethiopian state as ‘in-gathering-of-peoples’ bound by cultural destiny to union.¹⁶

The debate further triggered the birth of ethno-nationalist and pan-Ethiopianist armed groups. It also led to long and protracted civil war, which culminated in the assumption of state power by “ethno-nationalist” forces in 1991. Now the political pendulum of the country swung towards ethno-nationalism. The new government of Ethiopia, which is a coalition of ethno-nationalist groups, established a federal state on the basis of ethnic identity. Besides, it introduced the notion of “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” in to the constitution, which is meant to represent ethnic identity. This is part of the new government’s radical policy for new social reengineering. The constitution also categorically states that the “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” of Ethiopia have possessed the right to self-determination up to secession. Ethnic identity has been

¹⁴ The ethnic based movements were, the Oromo Peoples Liberation Front (OLF), The Eritrean People Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF), while the class based movements were represented by the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and The All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (AESM).

¹⁵ Alem Habtu, as above, 9

¹⁶ Donald Levin, *Greater Ethiopia: The evolution of a multiethnic Society*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), in Solomon Ayele, 37

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introduced as a basis to the exercise of the right to self-determination and in turn, the right to secession was recognized as an antidote to ethnic domination. The Ethiopian federalism allows the establishment of political parties along ethnic lines. Hence, ethnicity became the basis of political decision-making and the exercise of the right to self-determination. Thus, the adoption of federalism and the right to self-determination is part of the new social reengineering project of the Ethiopian state following the assumption of political power by ethno-nationalist groups.

The Ethiopian constitution does not directly employ the term ethnicity. It introduced the idea of “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples”. The phrase “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” is defined in the constitution “as a group of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory”.¹⁷ These criteria of defining ethnic identity are quite subjective and practically illusive considering the inter-marriage of groups and cultures in Ethiopia. It also begs another complex issue of who determines ethnic identity? It could be argued that the political elites play significant role in articulating and constructing ethnic claims.

II. The Formal Recognition of Federalism and the Right to Self-determination

2.1. Federalism: Conceptual Overview

Federalism represents a dual polity whereby government power is shared between the government of the centre and its constituent parts. According to Prodhoun, federalism is a “doctrine of balance”.¹⁸ It is all about compromise of interests and striking fair balance between integration and diversification, decentralization and centralization, centrifugal and centripetal forces. Daniel Elazar defines federalism as a “political remedy for political diseases”.¹⁹ It is designed to prevent tyranny by sharing political power between the

¹⁷ Constitution of The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Article 39(5)

¹⁸ Smith, *Federation, Defederation and Refederation from the Soviet Union to Russian Statehood*, (1995), 5

¹⁹ Daniel Elazar, *Exploring Federalism*, (University of Alabama Press, 1987), 5

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government of the centre and its constituent parts. Federalism advocates the values of “unity in diversity” or “Shared rule and self-rule”. Otherwise to say, federalism bestows regional units greater autonomy without actually affecting the country’s unity.

There is clear division of legislative, executive and judicial powers between the two tiers of governments. The regions are autonomous units of the federal government, which exercise legislative, executive and judicial functions. Essentially strategic powers like defense, monetary regulation, interstate trade and foreign relations are reserved to the government of the centre, whereas the federating units exercise powers related to the administration of their own affairs. It is basically designed to accommodate diversity and pluralism by maintaining unity. The units in a federal state may be created based on ethnic, linguistic or religious consideration or territory as an alternative. For instance, the USA federalism is demarcated along territorial lines, while the Indian federalism is basically delineated along ethnic lines. Some federations are the result of devolution of powers, while others are established through aggregation. For instance, the Swiss and USA federations provide examples of federations established through aggregation of previously independent states. The forest Cantons of Switzerland and the 13 British Colonies of North America came to together to establish the Swiss and American Federations respectively. However, the Belgian, Spanish and South African models are the result of devolution of powers of a formerly unitary state, which stems from the need on the part of regional units for greater autonomy in the exercise of their own affairs. Hence federalism is a kind of political compromise to strike balance between forces of assimilation and secession. The federal constitution is the supreme document, albeit the units have constitutions applicable within their own sphere of influence. The supremacy of the federal constitution is the result of it being the document elaborating the division of powers. Basically, it has rigid amendment procedure, which involves both the federal government and the regional states.

2.2. Federalism in Ethiopia

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Ever since the creation of modern Ethiopia by the end the 19thc, it had been ruled under a unitary system with the exception of the thwarted Ethio-Eritrean federation. The first written constitution of Ethiopia, adopted in 1931, established a centralized unitary state with sovereign powers residing in the hands of the emperor. In 1950 the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 390-A (V) that adopted the Federal Act, which establishes a federal arrangement between Ethiopia and Eritrea. However, the federation was an imposition from the UN rather than a covenant between the two countries. The 1955 Revised Constitution of Ethiopia did not recognize the federation, which subsequently led to its dissolution in 1962. The PDRE constitution adopted by the military regime in 1987 reiterated the idea of unitary state. The PDRE constitution was a short lived one and the military junta was deposed in 1991. Following the assumption of power by the ethno-nationalist groups in 1991, a new political order was introduced. The Transitional Period Charter adopted in July 1991 has served as a prelude for the establishment of a federal state, which was later formally introduced under the 1995 constitution. Even though the Transitional Period Charter does not make any specific mention of the term 'federal', it was clear that it was paving the way for the foundation of a federal state. Proclamation No. 7/1992 made the intention of the Charter clear by establishing "National Self-Governments", which are delineated along ethnic lines. The Proclamation transferred substantial powers to the self-governing political units. Besides, a Constitutional Commission was established to draft a new constitution. The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was ratified in December 1994 by a Constitutional Assembly and came in to effect in August 1995. The new constitution formalized a federal state structure that has been inaugurated by the Charter.

The very first article of the constitution stipulates the establishment of a federal state. The federal arrangement has nine federating units, which are basically demarcated on the basis of "settlement patterns, identity, language and consent of the people concerned".²⁰ The major component of the federal arrangement is ethnicity. However, ethnicity is not the sole component in the territorial demarcation of the regions. For instance, the

²⁰ FDRE constitution Article 45 (2)

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Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples regional state is composed of nearly fifty linguistic and ethnic groups. The fact that ethnicity is made to be the major component of the territorial demarcation of the units has been a subject of intense debate in the Ethiopian politics. Many opponents of the current arrangement would argue that the Ethiopian federalism should be reframed on territorial considerations. They further contend that ethnic federalism would not last longer and may lead to the disintegration of the historic Ethiopian state.²¹ It is submitted that political centralization is proved to be one of the causes of ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. Hence, a decentralized federal system was a condition precedent to keep the various ethnic and linguistic groups in Ethiopia together in the aftermath of the fall of the military regime. The proponents of this experiment contend that federalism is meant to give expression to the multicultural aspect of the country. However, there is one question that is worthy of consideration hear. What is the basic fact that calls for the establishment of a federal state in Ethiopia? If there is a need to federalize Ethiopia, the socio-political factor that poses the urgency is the multi-ethnic nature of the country that had been disregarded since the creation of modern Ethiopian state. Hence, making ethnicity a big ingredient in the demarcation of regional states is unavoidable instance of life to recognize the diverse nature of the country. Besides, it is also understood to give way to the exercise of the right to self-determination of the various groups.

The Ethiopian federalism has nine constituent units called regions.²² Besides, there are two city councils, which are chartered units with certain level of autonomy. The regional states exercise legislative, executive and judicial powers and re autonomous units of the federation. Article 47 (2) of the constitution also vividly stipulates that any ethnic group can establish its own state at any time it likes. This gives room for further creation of regional units. Each regional state has the right to choose its own working language.²³ Thus far, the *Tigray*, *Amahara* and *Oromiya* Regional states have chosen *Tigrigna*, *Amharic* and *Oromoffa* languages as their official languages respectively. However, the other

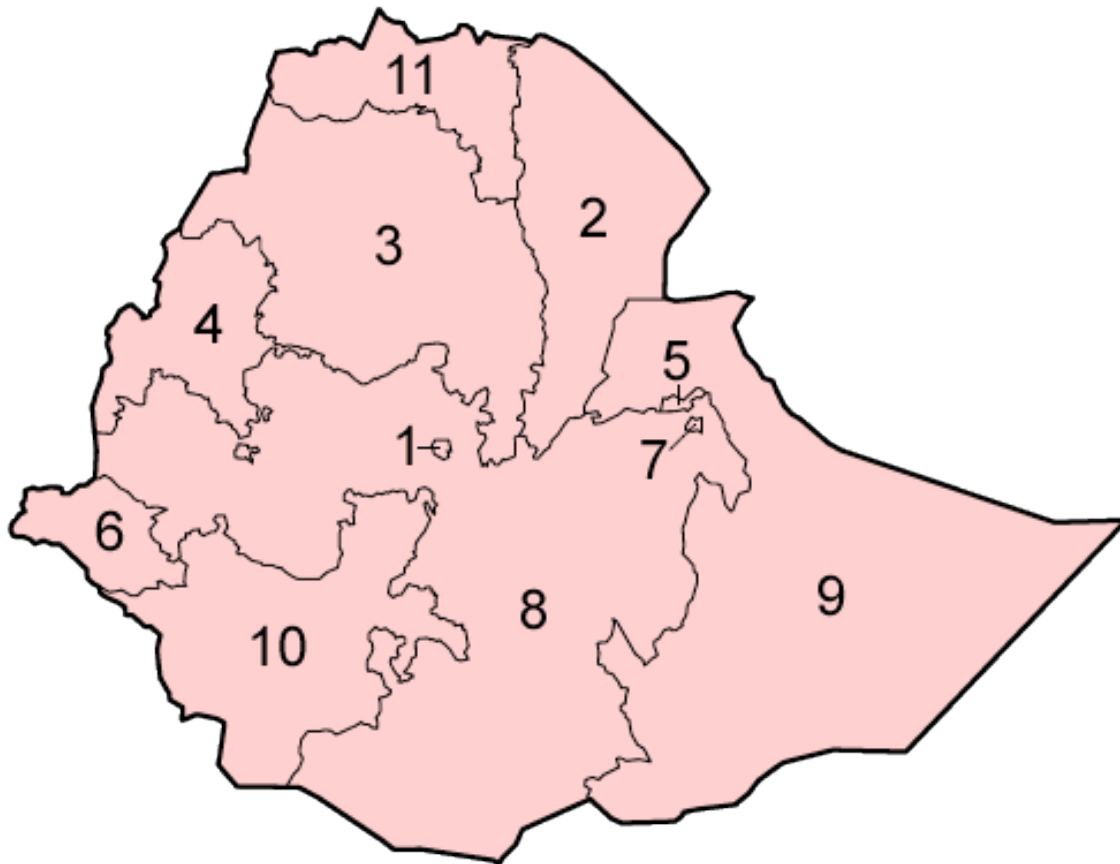
²¹ See Minase Haile, "Legality of Secession: The Case of Eritrea" 1994

²² Article 47(1)

²³ Article 5(2)

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regional states have still adhered to Amharic as their working language.



Map 1: The Nine Regional States and the two City Councils of Ethiopia

1. *Addis Ababa* City Council
2. *Afar* Regional State
3. *Amhara* Regional State
4. *Benishangul* Regional State
5. *Diredawa* City Councils
6. *Gambela* Regional State
7. *Harari* Regional State
8. *Oromia* Regional State
9. *Somali* Regional State
10. The Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State
11. *Tigray* Regional State

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It can be said that the Ethiopian model provides a good example of federalism by devolution. It is introduced against the unitary past of the country. This is simply because of the claims for autonomy by the various groups representing the historically marginalized ethnic groups. Thus, the Ethiopian federalism seems to be an attempt to strike fair balance between forces of centralization and secession. It particularly seems to be a political reaction to the policies of centralization and marginalization that led to the loss of confidence of minority groups on the Ethiopian state. The Ethiopian federalism is divided asymmetrically. Regional states like *Oromia* and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples have bigger size and resources than the others.

2.3. Conceptual Overview of Self-determination

Self-determination of peoples is recognized as one of the building blocks of international human rights law.²⁴ Historically, it was a political notion that later transformed itself into becoming one of the central ingredients of contemporary human rights law.²⁵ The emergence of self-determination into the international arena is associated with its employment to redraw the map of Europe. It was President Woodrow Wilson who proposed it to be the basis of the post war order when the territories of the former Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires required new sovereignties. The overriding importance attached to it can be seen from its inclusion in Article 1 of the UN Charter after WWII. Both ICCPR and ICESCR incorporate the right to self-determination in their very first article. Self-determination has also been the central principle to the General Assembly's 1960 Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples as well as the 1970 Declaration on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations. However, the right to self-determination of peoples is often clashing with the right to territorial integrity of states. This apparent contradiction poses heated controversy under international law. The contention is the result of the lack of precise definition of the "Peoples" to whom the right ascribes.²⁶ The traditional interpretation is

²⁴ Erric Herring, *Self Determination, The Right to, The Essentials of Human Rights*, Edited by Rhona K.M. Smith and Christien Van Den Anker (2005), 317-319

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 318

²⁶ Smith, *Text Book on International Human Rights*, (2007), 257

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that it is only a right to be claimed by people under colonial rule. This out-rightly rejects self-determination as a legal instrument to the claims of ethnic groups. Another approach represented by Judge Dillard in Western Sahara Case stated that 'it is for the people to determine the destiny of the territory and not the territory the destiny of the people'.²⁷ Scholars like Hurst Mannum and Allan Buchanan argue that international law is neither permissive nor prohibitive to the application of self-determination to the claims of ethnic groups.²⁸ Accordingly, ethnic self-determination is justified when the existing state refuses to cease perpetrating serious injustices or when the group's survival is threatened. This is the remedial theory, which bases itself on liberal democratic principle.²⁹ States that respect human rights of ethnic minorities, according to the remedial theory, are entitled to territorial integrity.

The notion of self-determination is often understood to mean secession. However, self-determination is much broader than secession. Self-determination encompasses both internal and external aspects. Internal self-determination is related to the right of people to choose its own government and to participate in the decision making process of government. Hence internal self-determination is often associated to democracy. The external aspect of self-determination refers to secession.

2.4. Self-determination in Ethiopia

The right to self-determination got constitutional recognition under the 1987 PDRE constitution proclaimed by the military government. Despite the explicit mentioning of the right to self-determination of nations in the preamble, the constitution failed to state the nature and extent of the right. After the downfall of the military junta, ethno-nationalist groups assumed power. Multiethnic coalition spearheaded by TPLF/EPRDF convened a national conference in July 1991, which adopted a Transitional Period Charter. Article 2 of the TPC stipulated the right to self-determination up to secession. The

²⁷ Western Sahara Case, ICJ Reports 1975

²⁸ A. Buchanan, *Secession: The Morality of Political Divorce from Fort Sumter to Lithuania to Quebec*, 1991, in Solomon Ayele,

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inclusion of the right to secession under article 2(c) gave rise to controversy when the article was invoked by EPLF to secede Eritrea from Ethiopia through a popular referendum held in 1993. In December 1994 the FDRE Constitution was adopted and the right to self-determination got constitutional status.³⁰ Accordingly, the right to self-determination has two aspects: the internal and external aspects. As per article 39 of the FDRE constitution, the internal aspects of self-determination constitute five major rights. Every “Nation, Nationality and People” in Ethiopia has the right to: a) use its own language; b) to promote its own culture; c) to preserve its history; d) to exercise full measure of self-government and e) to have equitable representation at both federal and regional decision making process.

Apart from the internal aspect, both the FDRE constitution and the TPC recognize the external aspect of the right to self-determination i.e., secession. The secession clause needs a special majority amendment procedure laid down in Articles 104 and 105 of the constitution. What is more, it is also one of the few non-derogable rights stipulated under Article 93 (3) (C). Unlike international human rights documents, both the TPC and the FDRE constitution stipulate the beneficiaries of the right to self-determination- Nations, Nationalities and Peoples. However, in contrast to the TPC, the FDRE constitution of Ethiopia stipulates the procedural conditions for the exercise of the right to secession. Unlike the TPC, the FDRE constitution does not stipulate the substantive conditions for secession. In the TPC, it is vividly stipulated that the right to external self-determination will materialize only when the right to the internal aspect of self-determination is abrogated, abridged or denied. This squarely fits in to the interpretation of Allan Buchanan discussed above. The framers of the constitution argue that the right to secession is the logical extension of the internal aspect of the right to self-determination. But, the FDRE constitution seems to adopt the position of Judge Dillard, whereas the TPC reflects the remedial theory.

²⁹ Michael Freeman, *Human Rights An Interdisciplinary Approach*, (2007), 123

³⁰ The infamous Article 39 of the FDRE constitution incorporates both the internal and external aspects of self-determination, which gave rise to perpetual debate in the Ethiopian politics.

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The proponents of the right to self-determination in Ethiopia argue that it is a guarantee for lasting peace and Promotes democracy. On the other hand, its opponents argue that the right to self-determination would lead to the disintegration of the Ethiopian state as witnessed by the separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia. It could be argued that the incorporation of the internal aspects of self-determination in to the Ethiopian constitution is a realistic approach to ethnicity in Ethiopia. Providing appropriate platform for the use of ones language, promotion of culture, preservation of history, full measure of self-governance and equitable representation at both regional and federal level is pragmatic solution to the problems of ethnic identity in Ethiopia. However, the right to secession remains to be contentious.

2.5. Interlink Between Federalism and Self-determination in Ethiopia

It has been pointed out above that the Ethiopian model is unique in the sense that it blends ethnic federalism with self-determination. The federal model is designed in a way that provides expression to ethnic identity. Besides, the federal arrangement paves way to the exercise of the right to self-determination of the various nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia. The fact that the federal model is based primarily on ethnicity enables every nation, nationality and people to use its language, promote its culture, and preserve its history. What is more, the Ethiopian federalism also enables a nation, nationality and people to exercise the right of to full measure of self-governance. It also enables the group to exercise the right to secession if it so chooses to break away from the union. In turn, Self-determination is also perceived to be a means to achieve a lasting peace by resolving ethnic conflicts. Hence, it is maintained that the Ethiopian federalism is a means to the exercise of the right to self-determination, which is given utmost emphasis in the Ethiopian constitution.

III. Challenges of the New Experiment

It has been stated that the Ethiopian federal model is a unique one in the sense that the

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notion of federalism cannot be viewed without actually relating it with the right to self-determination of the various ethnic and linguistic groups. Federalism is meant to serve a dual purpose: to give expression to the historically denied concept of ethnic identity and promote a lasting peace in the country by avoiding ethnic domination; and create conducive atmosphere for the exercise of the right to self-determination of the various nations, nationalities and peoples. It can further be argued that the Ethiopian experiment is logically consistent in its treatment of the notion of ethnic identity. The preamble of the constitution begins with "We, the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia..." to imply that the constitution belongs to the various nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia. In article 8, it goes on to state that sovereignty resides in the hands of the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia. Article 40(3) of the same also states that land is the common property of the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia. Every nation, nationality and people of Ethiopia is also guaranteed with the right to self-determination up to secession. The power to interpret the constitution is also entrusted to the House of Federation, which is the representative of the various nations, nationalities and peoples.³¹ Every nation, nationality and people has also the power to create a separate state through political divorce. Political parties can also be established along ethnic lines. These all suggest that the constitution gives proper recognition to ethnic identity and the right to self-determination and ethnic federalism are the basic pillars of political participation. However, the issue remains to be: does logical consistency of the constitution imply its practical viability? The new experiment has various challenges, which overshadow its success. The viability of the Ethiopian model hinges upon its ability to properly address these issues. The following are some of the challenges that the Ethiopian federal model needs to address in order to survive the tidal waves.

3.1. Minority Protection

The Ethiopian constitution in a unique fashion provides the right to self-determination of the various nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia. This right goes to the extent of

³¹ Cumulative reading of Articles 61 through 68 of the constitution.

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secession. Minority protection is considered to be an aspect of self-determination. Besides, the Ethiopian constitution also allocates 20 seats for minority groups in the House of Peoples Representatives.³² The Upper house of the bicameral parliament, the House of the Federation, is also composed of representatives of the various ethnic groups and every ethnic group is represented by at least one seat.³³ These facts may lead to the conclusion that the Ethiopian constitution is the most “minority-friendly”³⁴ constitution in the world. However, the irony remains that the Ethiopian constitution fails short of proper definition of minority and consequently lacks adequate protection to endogenous and exogenous minority groups. It has been stated time and again that the major basis of the Ethiopian federalism is ethnicity. Nonetheless, the geographic boundaries of the Regional States are not inhabited by homogenous ethnic groups. Consequently, every regional state has minority ethnic groups, which have survived the influence of the majority for many years, albeit the policy of assimilation pursued by the previous regimes. Even the two regional states that seem to have homogenous groups, Afar and Somali, encompassed ethnic minorities, which enjoy lesser protection than the majority. For instance, in *Tigray* regional state there exist two clearly visible endogenous minority groups: *Saho* and *Kunama*. Their right to self-determination is less practicable than the relatively larger group of *Tigreway*. The *Aw*i and *Oromo* minorities in *Amhara* regional state have the same challenge. There is one notable exception in this regard. The Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State has established a second house at regional level, which is entrusted with the task of protecting the rights of the minority ethnic groups. This is precisely because this regional state consists of half of the ethnic groups that live in Ethiopia. The constitution of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State guarantees special self-governing right to endogenous minority groups of the region.

Furthermore, the Ethiopian federalism gives much less protection to exogenous minorities (migrant ethnic groups) in every state. The *Amhara* and *Tigreway* minorities in

³² Article 54 (3)

³³ Article 61(1) and (2)

³⁴ Kjetil Tronvoll, *Ethiopia: A New Start? An Minority Rights Group International Report*, (2000), 20

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Oromia and the *Amhara* and *Oromos* in *Harari* regional state have no recognizable right to self-determination. This is precisely because the definition of nations, nationalities and peoples as stipulated under Article 39 (5) of the constitution states that the groups under consideration need to have a contiguous territory. Thus, exogenous minority groups living in states other than their state of origin have no recognized right to self-determination.

3.2. Proliferation of Ethnic Conflicts and Inter-state Boarder Disputes

The Ethiopian ethnic federalism and the recognition of the right to self-determination including secession is designed to avoid ethnic domination and lay a favorable condition for lasting peace. However, in the years of its implementation the major challenge remains to be unprecedented ethnic conflicts and boarder disputes. The ethnic conflicts in *Gambela* and *sidama* are chronic instances of the degree of threat it is posing to the infant Ethiopian federalism. Although it would be overgeneralization to argue that the Ethiopian federal model aggravated ethnic problems, there is equally less evidence to prove that it reduced ethnic conflicts. Resource competition, over politicization of ethnic differences and the drawing of ethnic boundaries contributed to the proliferation of ethnic conflicts. Some of the conflicts are instigated by the political elites, who preach ethnic hatreds between various people. For instance, the conflict between *Gujji* and *Gedeo* people (1995 and 1998) in the South was triggered by both resource competition and the propaganda of the cadres of the various political parties vying for power.³⁵ It could be said that this particular conflict is the result of self-governance question raised by the *Gujji*. It is also needless to say that the way these conflicts are resolved is an issue of major concern, which in some instances erode the very essence of federalism. As in the case of *Gambella*, the premature intervention of the federal government in resolving the issue by sending the national armed forces to quell the conflict was an overreaction. The fact that regional authorities had big involvement in the conflict creates further complication.

³⁵ Asebe Regassa , Ethnicity and Inter-Ethnic Relations: The 'Ethiopian Experiment' and the case of the Guji and Gedeo , (University of Tromso, 2007), 73-74

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Border disputes between regional states are also a big test to the viability of the federation. The border dispute between Somali and *Oromia*; and *Benishangul* and *Oromia* regional states provides a good instance. This has something to do with the preexisting way of life and use of resources. In the pastoral communities of Somali and *Oromia* boundaries are always fluid. The pastoral communities often cross boundaries in search of water and grazing land in different times of the year. Creating hard and fast boundaries would aggravate the ethnic tension. Creating a proper resource management strategy, which is compatible with the way of life of people in the adjoining territories, is instrumental. In contrast, in the sedentary agrarian regions of *Tigray* and *Amhara*, ethnic conflict are not common.

3.3. Domino Effect of State formation and Threat of Disintegration

The constitution recognizes the right of every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia to establish its own state at any time it likes.³⁶ At least theoretically, it is feared that this may lead to endless regress of state formation, which makes it impossible for the federal government to control. As discussed above, this question of ethnic identity may trigger ethnic conflicts as in the case of *Gujji* and *Gedeo*. Given the fact that sufficient protection is not given to endogenous and exogenous minority groups in every state, the claim for a separate regional state is always present. The referendum of *Silte* to establish a separate identity from *Gurage* is also another example of identity claims. The *Silte* speak the same language as other *Gurage* people, but with different dialect. Besides, most *Gurage* are Christians, while *Silte* are Muslims. Now *Silte* constitute a separate ethnic group based on a referendum held in March 2001 and have been granted a separate Zonal administration status. Besides, there are always persistent claims for a separate provincial status. This is particularly evident in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples regional state where over half of the ethnic groups of the country reside. Because of ethnic conflict and claims of domination, many of the groups are claiming a special *Wereda* (local government) status. These claims often lead to inter and intra-ethnic conflicts.

³⁶ Article 47 (2)

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Owing to the presence of the secession clause and the nature of the federal arrangement, many fear that the historical state of Ethiopia might disintegrate. This legitimate fear stems from the practical consideration of the history of ethnic federations of USSR, Nigeria and former Yugoslavia and the formal recognition of the right to secession in the constitution. Basically, federations are attempts to strike fair balance between centripetal and centrifugal forces. Hence, there is inherent danger that the balance may sway towards centrifugal forces. Particularly, history shows that ethnic federations are much more vulnerable to secession than territorial federations. What is more, the formal recognition of the right to secession in the constitution makes it a remedial right to end ethnic domination. Its application to justify Eritrea's independence and the claim for secession by political groups like the Oromo People Liberation Front (OLF), The *Ogaden* National Liberation Front (ONLF) and others provides an ever-present threat of secession. Particularly, the claim of these groups for secession by raising arms is a very astonishing fact. One may ask a very humbly question: why do groups like OLF raise arms to exercise the right to secession, which they could have enjoyed easily by resorting to the constitution? This casts certain doubt over the intention of the framers regarding the inclusion of the right to secession in the constitution. Many commentators would argue that its inclusion is meant to justify the secession of Eritrea, which preceded the adoption of the constitution. On the contrary, the Eritrean example proves that secession is not only a remote threat; it is rather an existing reality. Another side issue of the secession clause is: does secession guarantee a lasting peace? The Eritrean example proved otherwise. It is partly because the political elites claiming secession do not consider the economic viability of the newly created states. Bahru Zewde argues that the reason for the Ethio-Eritrean conflict of 1998 to 2000 was not boundary claim, as the Eritreans say.³⁷ The underlying reason for the Ethio-Eritrean war was rather failure on the part of the framers of the secession clause to foresee the economic base of Eritrea and the subsequent emergence of economically non-viable Eritrean state.³⁸

³⁷ See Bahru Zewde, *Vision 2020 Ethiopia, What Did We Dream? What Did We Achieve? And Where Are We Heading?* <http://www.eaecon.org/miscellaneous/vision2020/bahruv2020.htm>

³⁸ *Ibid*

3.4. Respecting Individual Rights In a Constitution of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples

The Ethiopian constitution declares the overriding importance of the rights of the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia. Its evident emphasis on the group rights has brought about concerns regarding individual rights. This challenge seems to assert the validity of the claim that multicultural federalism negates liberalism. The exercise of group right in the regional states is limiting freedom of movement of individuals. Regional states have the right to choose their own language. There are often clashes between the collective right of a nation, nationality and peoples of a certain region and the right of individuals living in that region. For instance, the language barriers are limiting freedom of movement of individuals, which is reasonably expected of people living in the same state. Further, the ethnification of regional bureaucracy has also prevented people from working in other regional states. If someone wants to learn and/or work in *Oromia* regional state, he has to speak the *Oromiffa* language.

3.5. Trends of Centralization and Weaker Regional States

The survival of the Ethiopian experiment so far has depended on the existence a dominant one party, which controls powers both at federal level and in major states like *Oromia*, *Amhara*, SNNP and *Tigray*. The remaining five regional states; *Afar*, *Benishangul*, *Gambella*, *Harari* and *Somali*, are also controlled by political parties that are affiliated with the ruling coalition party. This has the effect of centralizing state power. The regions are not independent from the influence of the federal government. It is submitted that the regions have de jure (constitutional) right of exercising their autonomous power. As a matter of fact they are following the orders of the federal government. Lovise Aalen goes to the extent of claiming that the Ethiopia is a centralized state.³⁹ The ruling coalition party, EPRDF, operates based on the principle of democratic centralization⁴⁰, which

³⁹ Lovise Aalen, *Ethnic Federalism in A Dominant Party State: The Ethiopian Experience 1991 to 2000*, Chr. Michelsen Institute Development Studies and Human Rights, (2002), 102

⁴⁰ Article 7 (1) (5) of the Statute of the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front adopted on September 2006 clearly states that one of the basic principles of its party structure is Democratic

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claims that decisions made by the central committee are binding on the party hierarchy. Hence the regional leaders are basically following the decision made by the central committee, which is made at the central level, the members of which are quiet often top ranking officials of the federal government. One notable example in this regard is inter-ethnic conflicts in the regional states. In instances where ethnic conflicts happen the Federal government intervened prematurely without giving the chance to the regional states to solve their own challenges. This has seriously weakened the regional states. Some also argue that the revenue sharing system between the federal government and the states is one of the reasons for the dependence of regional states on the federal government. It may be argued that the maturity of the Ethiopian federal model will be tested when different political parties hold power in different regional states. This will bring about the effective exercise of state power by the regions.

3.6. Asymmetrical Growth of Regional States

As a matter of fact, the delimitation of the member states based on ethnicity has created large socio-economic disparity among regional states. The resource base of the various regions is quiet asymmetrical; so does the developmental stage and administrative capacity of the various regional states. Some regional states are more developed than the others. Recent trends of investment have largely been accumulated in three of the regional states (*Amhara, Oromia* and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples regional states). This may lead to unbalanced development, which will in turn result in competition and conflicts. The poorer lowland regional states are always prone to ethnic conflicts, which are triggered by competition over scarce resources. The constitution seems to recognize this regional economic disparity, as it stipulates a provision that imposes an obligation on the part of the Federal government to provide affirmative actions to support the poorer regional states.⁴¹ However, the existing system of subsidy provided to the pastoral regions is further creating dependency of the states on the

Centralization. The adoption of this principle is a precondition for any political party that plans to join the front. Similarly, Article 7 (2) (9) also states that the decision of the party Central committee is binding on its members and lower hierarchy organs.

⁴¹ (Art. 89(4))

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Federal government. This compromises the autonomy of the regional states; as the Ministry of the Federal Affairs often intervenes in the affairs of the states for the purpose of implementation of projects.

V. Concluding Observations

The modern Ethiopian state formation brought together various linguistic, cultural, ethnic and religious groups under the newly created Ethiopian state. Although Ethiopia is often described as the "warehouse of nationalities", little attention had been given to the diverse aspects of the country and political centralization and ethnic domination had become the fashion of the day. This led to the rise of ethno-nationalist armed struggle and culminated with the assumption of state power by multi-ethnic coalition forces (EPRDF). The Transitional Period charter was adopted in 1991, which subsequently led to the adoption of the 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The constitution introduced a unique model of accommodating ethnic diversity, which incorporates ethnic federalism along with the exercise of the right to self-determination to the extent of secession of the various linguistic groups. The model is designed to give recognition to ethnic diversity and pave the way to a lasting peace. It may be argued that the Ethiopian model was a pragmatic solution to the problems of ethnicity. Federalism was the only viable model that could bind together the people of Ethiopia in the aftermath of the demise of the military regime. Many political groups put federalism and the inclusion of the right to self-determination as a condition precedent to political participation during the transitional period. It is submitted that the basic socio-political factor that calls for the adoption of a federal model in Ethiopia is ethnic diversity. Thus, creating a federal model that gives recognition to the ethnic identity of groups was unavoidable instance of life in Ethiopian politics. Making ethnicity the major basis of establishing the constituent units is the result of political necessity. What is more, the right to self-determination is also important to recognize the language, culture and history of the various ethnic groups. It also provides a platform for political participation by promoting self-rule. However, the issue of secession remains to be controversial. The framers of the constitution justify the secession clause as guaranteeing smooth withdrawal. The Eritrean example shows that it

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got its independence after 30 years of bloody struggle. It may also be argued that the presence of the secession clause has only symbolic value. Its presence does not necessarily facilitate secession, nor does its absence avoid it. What matters most is the way the federal institutions treat the issue of ethnic diversity and pluralism. As long as ethnic diversity is given proper recognition and ethnic domination is avoided, the threat of secession is minimal. Besides, the way ethnic conflicts are managed is also instrumental in avoiding secession. What is more, the major challenges that have come in the course of its implementation have to be addressed properly. It is however conceded that the ethics of secession should be properly spelt out in the constitution. Apart from the procedural conditions, the substantive preconditions for secession should also be stipulated. Great care should also be taken not to get over fixated with the ethnic differences. Equal emphasis should also be placed on the common denominators of the Ethiopian people, which are the result of centuries of intermarriage of peoples. Over fixation on differences is as much venomous as the reductionist approach followed by the preexisting regimes. It can thus be concluded that the Ethiopian federalism is an ideal model on paper, albeit serious concerns regarding its implementation.

Despite the Ethiopian model's survival for over a decade, serious challenges remain to overhaul its success. Primarily, the Ethiopian experiment does not afford enough protection to ethnic minorities living in various regions. The right to self-determination provided in the constitution is exercisable only to those dominant ethnic groups in the various regions. There is little or no protection to exogenous and endogenous minority groups. Providing proper protection to endogenous and exogenous minorities living in various states is a sine-qua-non for its future success. Guaranteeing individual rights in a constitution leaning towards group rights is another serious challenge. Striking fair balance between respecting individual rights and the exercise of the right to self-determination of a group is necessary to promote a cooperative atmosphere, which will make the federation viable and reduce ethnic tensions. Another area of concern is economic imbalance of regional states. In a poor country like Ethiopia, competition over scarce resources may lead to the demise of the federation and lead to disintegration. Hence, the federal government should try to support the relatively poor lowland states.

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However, it should not be done in a manner that would result in the dependence of the states on the federal government; nor should it undermine the autonomy of the states. The management of ethnic conflicts is also a vital step to make the federation viable. In multiethnic states like Ethiopia where there are longstanding ethnic conflicts and history of violence over use of resources, the way the conflicts are managed is much more important than the causes of the conflict. Finally, in a predominantly illiterate society like Ethiopia where unitary rule was considered to be the norm, the understanding of the people on the federal arrangement influences their loyalty to federal values. Hence, injecting federal values on people is instrumental to the viability of the Ethiopian model.

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