

A Critical Examination of the Sustainability of the Ethiopian Federal Governance Model & Whether it Has Achieved Its Envisioned Goals

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Abstract

Managing ethnic-related conflicts and providing regional autonomy for various groups is at the core of federal state systems. Countries that often opt for federal systems are those with huge populations and multiple ethnic groups. In Ethiopia, federalism was introduced in 1991 and solidified through the Ethiopian Federal Constitution (FDRE) (1995), which distributed power to nine regions at the time. Thus, by ceding some of the powers from the center to the regions, the federal government aimed to offer varied groups a sense of ownership and belonging. This study examines the Ethiopian federal system to gauge whether the lofty ambitions of federalism have been realized, thirty years after the enactment of the Federal Constitution. To accomplish this, the study employs a qualitative methodology based on document analysis to critically examine the functioning and foundational character of Ethiopia's federal structure. The study finds that while the creation of the federal government has led to some successes, the federal system, overall, has not delivered tangible results, especially because many people in various regions still feel

marginalized. Specifically, people feel excluded from economic relations and remain fearful of the recurrence of civil conflict. This discontent shows that, despite having a robust federal Constitution, the absence of a strong political will, such as a lack of genuine inclusivity in governance, and the absence of a firm conviction by political leaders to rise above regional and ethnic politics, federalism on its own cannot deliver peace and economic prosperity.

Keywords: Ethnic Conflicts, Economic development, Ethiopia, Ethnicity, Federalism, Marginalization

Introduction

This study takes a critical normative approach in analyzing the ontology, dynamics and sustainability of the Ethiopian federal system of government. The Ethiopian federal process began in 1991 and was eventually solidified through the Ethiopian Federal Constitution (1995). The initial constitutional process of 1991 began by organizing a multi-ethnic framework with organizing a multi-ethnic blueprint dubbed 'Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia' to champion self-determination for all Ethiopians. It was this forum that recommended the eventual

establishment of the ethnic federal system as a framework for resolving issues related to ethnic diversity (NEGARIT GAZETA, 1991). It is argued that the genesis of the Ethiopian federal system arose from many years of suppression of diversity, accompanied by national-building policies, but which otherwise often resulted in violence under the previous unitary regimes. Such suppression inevitably led to different groups mobilizing along ethnic lines to seek redemption and autonomy (Abbink, 1997).

In 1991, the new government, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of four major revolutionary political parties, sought to model their government system on a federal structure. These four major political groupings comprised the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), and the South Ethiopian People's Democratic Front (SEPDF). Despite being in an alliance, the TPLF, a minority within the larger state of Ethiopia, dominated the political agenda of the group (having been the key architects of the revolution), which rendered the other three alliance members as mere helots of the TPLF (Simuziya, 2024).

However, the new Federal Constitution of 1995 provided groups with the right to self-determination and the possibility to secede. Although there are over 80 Ethiopian Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (NNP), only nine states

were created in 1995, but subsequently increased to twelve by 2023 (Yimenu, 2024). Considering the Constitution as the supreme law of the land, both levels of government are recognized as autonomous regarding the powers granted to them. However, the laws of the central government will prevail if there is a legal dispute between the two. Additionally, despite the dispersion of power, the central government remains the pillar of key governance units of the country, which controls foreign affairs, national defense, monetary policies, transport, and natural resources (FDRE Constitution, 1995). In other words, although Ethiopia has a unique Federal Constitution that allows secession, there seems to be no harmony with the political reality on the ground because the dominant ruling political party still operates with a centralized governance disposition.

The research questions for this study, therefore, are: (1) Has the federal system in Ethiopia answered the key national question, which is to distribute national resources equitably, or simply put, have the economic benefits trickled down due to federalism? (2) Has the federal system eased ethnic tensions, promoted unity, increased the fundamental freedoms of citizens, and reduced fear among the population of recurrent conflicts and civil unrest? This study builds on existing studies on Ethiopian federalism, such as Gebeye (2023), Yimenu (2024), Gudina (2011), Kefale (2019), Bekalu (2018), Eshete (2003), and Fiseha (2007). These studies hint that federalism

is a structure that organizes states into at least two layers of government to realize both self-rule and shared rule between the central government and the regional governments. Also, federalism is most appropriate for a country with a large, heterogeneous population, often with extensive territories. This study contributes to the literature through a critical analysis of the dynamics of Ethiopian federalism, examined as a single case. Such a critical analysis of a single case helps the reader to grasp the unique federal elements of the Ethiopian federal system with greater clarity.

Gebeye (2023) describes the federal rationale as the *best of big and the best of small*. In Ethiopia, ethnicity has been used as the fundamental principle of federal formation, commonly known as ethnic federalism.

Yang (2000) cited by Muluye (2020, p.41) sees ethnicity as a subjective way of collective belonging based on shared ancestry, culture and history. He identifies three theories that are associated with explanations on the makeup of ethnicity as follows (a) the theory of primordialism asserts that ethnicity is rooted in the time and place where a person is born and thus, the human relations are nurtured through the kinship traditional connections (b) the constructivist theory posits that ethnicity is a social construct built much more on perception than reality (c) the theory of instrumentalism asserts that affiliation with an ethnic group is often mobilized to gain comparative benefits over

others, and hence is an identity built on rational considerations. Overall, the gist of the ethnic claim is to preserve the interests of their groups through the protection of their distinct ethnic and traditional practices.

On the one hand, proponents of the federal system assert that the political challenges of contemporary Ethiopia are not a result of the ethnic federal system but emanate from a lack of accountability and the erosion of democratic principles by the central government, hence the need to disperse power. Proponents argue that the absence of transparency and accountability from the central government has resulted in constitutionalism and democratization failing to reign as a normative model of governance as required in a modern state. On the other hand, opponents of the federal system argue that the system of ethnic federalism is the reason Ethiopia is in this political conundrum; that it has increased group conflicts and created a barrier to democratic constitutionalism. In other words, the ethnic characteristics of the Ethiopian federal system have hampered the notion that the individual should be the central unit of consideration in polity governance. Instead, it has paved the way for ethnicity to reign as a key unit of consideration in governance (Gebeye, 2023, pp.157-160).

There is also a theory that suggests that Ethiopia's federalism in 1991 may have been exploited simply as a marriage of convenience by the incoming EPRDF government. Given the

population's political tribulations under previous regimes before 1991, federalism was seen as the only feasible route to national stability. But other political actors regarded federalism as a ploy to disintegrate the country along ethnic lines; after all, the TPLF, although being the kingpin of the EPRDF, was itself a minority ethnic group from the Tigray region. Analyzed from this angle, the TPLF, therefore, had no incentive to keep a unitary state. Put another way, since the TPLF was a minority group (but masquerading as the EPRDF), the only way to consolidate power was autocracy and to create ethnic federalism to operate as a form of divide-and-rule tactic that would shift the attention of the population from the regime's autocratic rule and lack of transparency. In this way, different ethnic groups would move their focus from insisting on government accountability and instead concentrate on fighting each other along ethnic lines. Seen from this angle, the federal system may have been created simply to serve narrow political ends (Simuziya, 2024). Since 1991, there had been a wide perception that the ruling alliance (the EPRDF) was systematically marginalizing certain ethnicities, notably those from the Amhara and Oromo groups. Despite the assurances contained in the legislature regarding human rights protection of all Ethiopians, certain groups have continued to feel discriminated against (Atnafu, 2018).

The TPLF's dominance and the gradual weakening of the socioeconomic, security, and

political apparatus began to cause discord and ultimately sparked popular outcry, which forced the TPLF-led EPRDF government to implement internal reforms, resulting in a new leadership taking power in 2018. The transition in leadership, with Abiy Ahmed becoming Prime Minister, resulted in significant changes to the country's ethnic federalism system. While the formal ethnic federalism structure (as codified in the 1995 Federal Constitution) remained unchanged, several significant policy shifts occurred.

The usefulness of the federal model as an appropriate response to the challenges Ethiopia faces continues to dominate discourses on the quest for greater autonomy for sub-units. This can only be achieved if the central government is transparent and accountable. To date, there seems to be no consensus among scholars on which system might offer better dividends between a unitary state and a federal state, or how a federal system itself (as is currently the case in Ethiopia) can be transformed to offer citizens better growth opportunities (Fessha & Dessalegn, 2022, p. 215). Below is a diagram showing the regional states.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodological framework, based on document analysis which is best suited for an extensive examination of intricate phenomena such as the federal systems of governance. Qualitative research is an umbrella term for a wide variety of approaches and methods for the study of social life. The data generated and analysed in a qualitative study are mainly non-quantitative in form (Saldana, 2009). Lim (2025) asserts that the value of qualitative research lies in its capacity to generate contextual insights that connect research to real-world phenomena. Bowen (2009) defines qualitative research as a systematic review and examination of documents to gain contextual meaning of a phenomenon. Bowen identifies some of the following benefits of choosing document analysis approaches (1) they are less time-consuming and hence, efficient and cost-effective in providing results, (2) the documents to be studied are usually readily available especially in the age of real-time online digital information (3) document analysis is not intrusive or reactive, hence does not affect the research process (4) document analysis has the quality of exactness in the sense of referencing the exact dates, names of sources and events (Bowen, 2009, pp. 31-32). Morgan (2022) posits that document analysis examines various types of documents, both in text form as well as in visual forms. One of the advantages of document analysis is that it decreases ethical



Figure 1. Federal states of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

Source: HOA Channel, 2024.

The map above demonstrates the continued drive for self-determination and the increasing number of Ethiopian regional member states. It shows the twelve federal states of Ethiopia and two chartered city-state administrations, namely, Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa. The other regional states are Tigray Regional State (Mekelle); Afar Regional State (Semera); Amhara Regional State (Bahir Dar); Oromia Regional State (Finfinne/Addis Ababa); Somali Regional State (Jigjiga); Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State (Assosa); Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNP)(Sodo); Sidama Regional State (Hawassa); Gambela Regional State (Gambela); Harari Regional State (Harar); South West Ethiopia Peoples' Region (Bonga); and Central Ethiopia Regional State (Hosaena).

concerns associated with other qualitative methods.

This study relied on document and archival modes of data collection as proposed by Bowen (2009) and Morgan (2022). This qualitative approach allowed for a critical evaluation of the functional and foundational aspects of Ethiopia's federal structure that are difficult to quantify. It involved thorough examination and interpretation of documents through a combination of content and thematic analysis. Pertinent materials were gathered through a methodical synthesis of primary and secondary sources. The database included a wide range of items, such as archives, official documents, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and research papers, as well as media publications, and other electronic or web-based scholarly works. The main official government documents that were scrutinised in this study as part of document analysis are as follows:

- (1) the Ethiopian Federal Constitution (1995).
- (2) the House of Federation (HOF) (1995) mandate document.
- (3) the Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia document, called the NEGARIT GAZETA (1991).

A systematic review of those documents provided the background data that helped to comprehend the social, economic and political context in which the Ethiopian federalism is situated. The analytical procedure took a generic inductive approach as proposed by (Creswell,

2009). This method began with the organising and processing of raw data, which was then followed by a systematic examination using information segmentation and categorisation or coding to discover and interrelate emerging themes. Coding was done manually and the coded materials were put into categories which were compared with other information sources. Coding is a useful method of organising dense data into manageable amounts and helps to make sense of it by revealing trends and patterns (Berthet et al. 2023). In situations where new categories emerged within the coding system, the previous data were re-examined. This way of analysing information made it possible to refine the ideas. Finally, the analysis was concluded by deriving meanings connected from these themes and obtaining broader insights from the data. To confirm the findings' reliability and validity, the study used triangulation, which involved cross-referencing material from both primary and secondary sources to synthesise a comprehensive view of crucial topics. Research triangulation is an important aspect of testing theories by relying on multiple sources of information. In this way of converging data, the findings gain greater credibility and reliability (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021; Noble & Heale, 2019). Improving the credibility and validity of research through triangulation helps to increase researcher's confidence. However, validity of every research cannot be wholly assured, thus, the collected data may still contain grey areas (Social Sciences Research Laboratories, 2018).

Despite the effectiveness of the research approaches used in this study, there were three limitations that were identified as follows:

(1) The study does not include comparative research of other federal systems in Africa, such as Nigeria which could have provided more insights into the mechanics of federal systems than relying only on a single case of Ethiopia. In this context, the study's generalizability is limited.

(2) The study did not conduct any interviews with Ethiopian federal and regional authorities who could have provided more information on the prospects and challenges of the federal system since they are directly involved in the running of the system itself. As such, future studies may focus on exploring these study gaps.

(3) A qualitative approach based on document analysis which this study relied upon can be prone to researcher bias, and thus, may lead to subjectivity rather than objectivity in the interpretation of the available data. For example, the coding criteria, i.e., the type of data which a researcher may categorize as 'crucial' to the findings, can itself be a process built on subjective views held by the researchers' prior perception of phenomenon. Siegesmund et al. (2008) define subjectivity as a person's opinions or their preferred standpoints on a given subject. Siegesmund et al. (2008) further argue that the objectivity vs subjectivity aspects could be a result of the tension between knowledge and scepticism. Moses & Knutsen (2012) also see

empirical observation as inherently biased, whereby it is theory-dependant: theory tells you what to look for, and as such, people (researchers) may have the tendency of seeing what they want to see. Furthermore, seeing is not necessarily equivalent to believing.

One of the most striking examples of subjective analysis can be illustrated by the comments made in 2002 by the former US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld: at a media briefing, a journalist asked Rumsfeld on why the US was intending to invade Iraq despite thin evidence of Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). In reply, Rumsfeld argued that despite the issue of thin evidence, his country would still pursue an invasion path because, 'the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence' (Simuziya & Jalu, 2023, p. 36). Rumsfeld's response is instructive as it proves the point that Moses & Knutsen (2012) put across when they argued that despite evidence being available, people tend to ignore such evidence and instead, prefer to see what they want to see.

However, subjectivity should not always be seen as a setback. Peshkin (1988) argues that subjective assessments of a researcher can be a capable means of shaping data. The real issue is that the researcher needs to be self-aware of how their subjective stances might affect their findings. Barone (2000) weighs in by suggesting that the debate on whether the research is objective or subjective is neither here nor there. For Barone, the real criterion lies in the

research's ability to provide meaningful insights into a given phenomenon. Goertz & Mahoney (2012) point out that in social science research, a core tenet of information assessment lies in the idea that correlation should not necessarily be connected to causation because data often under-determines theory. Scholars can look at the same data but come up with contrasting standpoints.

Literature Review

Field (1993, pp. 445-447) defines federalism as a division of powers between national and sub-national strata where each stratum is granted certain powers. This definition generally aligns with what other studies have described as a federal system. The concept is premised on the idea that the more governments you have within the larger state, the greater the number of voices and the more robust the participation. In theory, the federal system has a higher capacity to contribute to national prosperity through a decentralized economy inspired by innovation and proactive civic engagement from the grassroots. Using a normative federal theory, a state opts for a federal system instead of a unitary structure because the idea of shared rules allows citizens to enjoy both sides of the coin. Citizens appreciate the benefits that accrue from belonging to a smaller state, such as recognition through innovative local projects, while at the same time appreciating the benefits of belonging to a larger country, such as influencing policy and practice due to the vitality of local programs.

The dominant actor in International Relations, the state, is an abstract political configuration that conventionally refers to a politically organized society. In terms of the patterns of power distribution between the central and local or sub-national governments, states are usually organized in two ways, namely, the unitary state and the federal state. The unitary system (the most common structure globally) is a political arrangement where all powers – the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary are concentrated at the center. It is characterized by centralization of power and indivisible sovereignty and the absence of subsidiary sovereign bodies, unilateral decision-making, and unchecked centralization of power (Manikkalingam, 2003).

For this study, we focus on the federal state system. The federal system is a form of state structure where power and responsibilities are formally (constitutionally) divided and shared between the federal (central) and sub-national (regional) governments. It is the direct opposite of unitary government. Dual policies, territorial division, and bicameral parliament are some of the basic characteristics of a federal system. A bicameral parliamentary system has two chambers, whereby a law cannot be enacted unless both houses agree on the proposed legislation (Bulmer, 2017). The federal model is not unique to Ethiopia, as there are more than twenty other federal states across the globe, representing 40% of the global population (Caballero, 2023). From its origin, the word

'federalism' comes from the Latin word *foedus*, meaning covenant or treaty (Elazar & Kincaid, 1984). Hence, federalism, being essentially a treaty, is a solemn agreement among smaller groups to form a larger polity with a center empowered to oversee all the smaller groups. Kincaid (2002) contends that the covenant signifies a binding partnership among co-equals in which the parties to the covenant retain their identity and integrity.

Riker (1964) identifies three key features of a federal system which he describes as: (1) the two levels of government that rule the same land and people (2) each level has at least one area of action in which it is autonomous, and (3) there is some guarantee of autonomy for each government in its designated territorial sphere. Elazar (1987) asserts that federalism is both self-rule and shared rule in a polity. Watts (2008) defined federalism as the advocacy of multi-tiered government combining elements of shared rule and regional self-rule. From these definitions, it can be inferred that federalism is a government system with two tiers of government endowed with sovereign power on specific matters. Thus, federation is a non-unilateral system that offers both horizontal and vertical divisions of power and representation mechanisms.

On the paths through which federations have been formed, Stefan (2005) proposed three types of federalism named *Coming Together*, *Holding Together*, and *Putting Together*. The first category

involves independent states coming together on their own to form a bigger unit, so that by pooling sovereignty and retaining identity, they can increase their security. This *Coming Together* federation is an outcome of bargaining among independent states interested in creating a more stable and efficient union. The second category, *Holding Together*, is where a large country decides to divide its power between states and the national government – this is mainly established to keep together an already existing state through the democratic bargaining of the central government with individual regions for the degree of their autonomy. The third category is established through a heavily coercive effort by a non-democratic centralizing power of *Putting Together* of a multinational state, some of the components of which may have previously been independent states. From the three systems outlined above, the Ethiopian federal structure seems to fit the concept of *Holding Together*.

Further, federalism has variants which might take the form of *Asymmetric* or *Symmetric* federalism. On the one hand, asymmetrical federalism refers to the allocation of different amounts or types of powers, or autonomy in certain policy areas to certain sub-units of a federation but not others. Symmetrical federalism, on the other hand, refers to a federal system of government in which the constituent states of the federation possess equal powers, and no distinction is made between constituent states (Tarlton, 1965). In federal countries, federated entities can be established

on a territorial basis or a cultural basis. Territorial federalism consists of splitting the national territory into geographical zones, regions, provinces, and districts based on geographical considerations, while cultural federalism involves self-administration over the cultural, linguistic, ethnic, or religious matters of a determined group (Eide, 2017). Thus, the presence of diversity, a sense of military insecurity, the need for common defense, and a desire to have regional autonomy are all tied to the desire for federalism (Paleker, 2006).

It is argued that the ideal government is closer to the people and, therefore, will be more responsive to their needs. While federalism can promote diversity and stability, it can also slow down progress due to an expansive bureaucratic system. To show things differently, Hale (2004) and Horowitz (1985) contend that the creation of explicitly ethnic federal units may not be hazardous to the survival of the federation if no single ethnic region becomes dominant or comes to constitute an absolute majority of the federation's population. The federal system can be creatively managed and cultivated to reduce the opportunities for ethnic domination at the national level. Also, the federal system generates intragroup competition within ethno-regional units, thereby deflecting the intensity of inter-ethnic or ethnic autonomy conflicts. Further, the federal system promotes governance issues that cut across ethnicity and mitigate inter-regional developmental disparities.

However, Field (1993) argues that federal systems may also have challenges of duplication of work that might breed inefficiency in service delivery. A prime example relates to the dual court system; whereby certain cases may be delayed because the forum to adjudicate certain matters may overlap. Furthermore, within the states, some minority groups may not be fully protected by their specific state, which would then require the central government to create a more robust Bill of Rights that is enforceable across all local units. The federal system is porous to the 'power of exit' by certain groups, whereby people may relocate to other regions (perceived to be better) if their local governance law systems are inflexible or unwilling to accommodate their specific preferences. Although this is rare, it remains a possibility that can hamper growth under a federal system.

Gebeye (2023, pp.163-164) also adds that although the idea of separation/secession (which is supported by the Constitution) is at variance with the very principle of federalism, Ethiopia nevertheless constructed its federal model on the normative commitment that secession remained a legitimate possibility.

In Ethiopia, demands for the creation of more states continue to persist, and there are numerous petitioners to the House of Federation (HOF) (1995) seeking recognition of their separate state and ethnicity. However, except for Sidama (an ethnic group based in the Southern region), which recently became an additional

regional state in 2020, all other fresh requests have been rejected. The constitution is considered rigid because the mode of amendment is daunting. Besides, the Ethiopian Federal Constitution (1995) presents itself as if it were the result of a freely negotiated bargain; yet this is not the case. Sub-units had no prior independent existence; therefore, the assumed representative notion of the 1995 Federal Constitution does not reflect the reality on the ground (Turton, 2006). The misconception stems from the belief that in 1991, the Derg government (1974-1991) was dismantled, and going forward, most ethnic groups believed that they now had their liberation fronts that could control their respective areas, with the authority to decide whether to band together or secede to establish their republic. But the Ethiopian Federal Constitution was formed by the devolution of power from the center to the ethno-territorial regions, rather than the other way round. Moreover, there has been a single-party domination (by the EPRDF from 1991 to 2018, and subsequently by the Prosperity Party, from 2019 to date). In all these years, there has been an absence of genuine political pluralism. Furthermore, the result of the Ethiopian party structure, *democratic centralism*, which requires all policies to be adopted by the ruling political party, (the Prosperity Party), and to be followed slavishly by regional governments, negates the federal principle of the division of powers, and thus, carries with it, a threat that could

undermine the strength of the federal system (The Habesha, 2025).

Yimenu (2024) argues that the possibility of secession appears to be counterproductive, given that, in the first instance, the normative theory behind federalism is to *eliminate* the idea of secessionist agendas. Thus, in the Ethiopian case, regardless of whether the federal model is arranged along ethnic lines or not, the absence of legislative commitment to the federal union poses a challenge to the sustenance of federalism itself.

Drawing from the inferences presented by Teshome (2008) regarding the challenges posed by ethnic politics in Africa, it can be inferred that the political instability driven by ethnicity explains why many African states, despite being multinational, still prefer to remain unitary states governed by strong central governments. Although it is possible to have a federal system that does not permit secession, most African countries are reluctant to pursue a federal system anyway. For many African states, the main fear of federalism is the idea of opening a Pandora's box of successionist ambitions, whereby granting autonomy to certain national minorities may open the door for others to make similar demands. Thus, the Ethiopian case shows that, beyond diversifying the geography of the existing theories on federalism, Ethiopia offers a unique template of a federal model for other African states that may wish to opt for a federal system.

The Post-2018 Ethiopian Federalism

In 2018 amid widespread demonstrations demanding regime change, especially from the Oromia and Amhara regions, the ruling EPRDF government came under considerable pressure, and the Prime Minister then, Hailemariam Desalegn was forced to resign. Abiy Ahmed, a member of the OPDO, a minor partner in the EPRDF coalition came to power as the successor in that same year of 2018. Frustrations with authoritarian rule, land grabs, and political marginalization had been major causes of the uprisings against the government. Thus, Abiy's ascension to prominence from the marginalized yet largest ethnic group in Ethiopia (the Oromo), had significant political implications for the nation.

The new administration took power during an ethnic federalism crisis. Since early 2018, violent conflicts have decimated multiple towns in Ethiopia's various regions which had resulted in huge displacements of people. In 2018, Ethiopia was rated among the countries with the highest number of new internal displacements associated with civil conflicts, and in that year, inter-ethnic violence resulted in around 2.9 million additional displacements, four times the total for 2017 (Semir, 2019, p.3).

During Abiy's early years of administration, several significant policy changes and political dynamics arose, even if the formal framework of ethnic federalism remained intact. Abiy advocated for a stronger civic nationalism

approach by promoting national unity over ethnic divisions through his philosophy espoused in his book, *Medemer*, which means synergy or coming together. In 2019, the EPRDF was disbanded, and the Prosperity Party (PP) took its place. As a unitary, pan-Ethiopian party, the PP was intended to lessen the ethnic regional politics which had dominated the fallen EPRDF regime. However, the PP also created problems as it was perceived to be determined to crack down on regional autonomy. The consequence of this PP policy disposition was that conflicts began due to resistance by several regional states, especially Tigray against a seeming route to 'centralization' of power. The conflict in Tigray (2020–2022) was partially caused by disputes around who exercises power in the regions between regional authorities and federal authorities. As such, revisions to ethnic federalism, including redrawing regional borders or even lowering the unconditional right to secession (Article 39), have since been under discussion although no significant modifications have been finalized. The contradictions over the federal system continue to emerge; for instance, Ethiopian unity is given more prominence above anything else, as evidenced by the resuscitation of imperial-era symbols and the advancement of Amharic as a uniting national language (Jalu & Simuziya, 2025).

The new government implemented policies that supported federalism, and wide-ranging reforms have been undertaken. Key among them was the

release of political prisoners, and de-listing of banned ethnic and regional parties (such as the Oromo Liberation Front, or ONLF) from terrorist organizations. Other reforms included the lifting of censorship and the state of emergency, allowing exiled opposition leaders to return, and the establishment of a National Dialogue Commission. Further, new regional states were created, and the right to self-determination was also guaranteed. For instance, in 2019, 98.5% of voters in the Sidama Region supported breaking away from the SNNPR. Thus, Sidama formally became Ethiopia's tenth regional state with constitutionally guaranteed autonomy. Aside from Sidama, a referendum in 2021 was also held in the Southwest Ethiopia Peoples' Region and was approved by more than 98% of voters. After receiving approval from the House of Federation, the Southwest region became the eleventh regional state. Similar changes took place in the Central Ethiopia Regional State, making it the 12th regional state in 2023 (Oromian Economist, 2025).

Governance Challenges Under Federalism

Despite federalism, Ethiopia's rule of law and institutions remain weak, and thus, may lack the capacity to be fully independent. For instance, on the World Freedom Index, Freedom House ranks Ethiopia among the lowest index scores in the world at 18/100, and as such, the country is listed as *not free* (Freedom House, 2024). This shows that the Ethiopian federalism's promise of

freedom has been undermined by the absence of real democracy.

Applying fundamental democratic principles is necessary for effective federalism. These principles include popular sovereignty, which allows citizens to choose their leaders at all levels of government; rule of law, which ensures that all government actions are based on the law; separation of powers and checks and balances, which prevents any one branch or level of government from dominating; and free, fair, and competitive elections, which ensure legitimacy and accountability. Additionally, it calls for political pluralism and participation, which allow for a range of voices and political competition; an independent judiciary to fairly settle disputes and maintain constitutional order; protection of minority rights to prevent marginalization; transparency and accountability in governance; decentralization and real local autonomy to allow regions meaningful self-rule; and a strong sense of national unity that respects diversity and strikes a balance between local identities and a common national goal. Without these democratic underpinnings, federalism is unlikely to be viable or successful.

On the question of the economy, Ethiopia remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with a Gross National Income (GNI) per capita of only 1,130 USD (Statista, 2023).

For the federal system to hold, it needs political will governed by a clear path towards development politics rather than a path towards

power politics. Currently, the power politics route has been translated into a federal system that has evolved as a tool for political patronage and seems to be leaning towards a client-patron system where self-serving agendas are the norm. Therefore, the population must develop a mindset whereby elected leaders are made accountable for their actions as a mechanism to reduce impunity among the ruling elites (Kaufman, 2017).

A survey report of Afro-barometer (2024) shows that the three most important concerns of the Ethiopian population are as follows: (1) fixing the economy, (2) improving water supply, and (3) the threat of civil conflicts. The same survey report suggests that more than 50% of the sample population believes that the country is not well-governed.

On the issue of corruption, the federal system seems to be prone to higher levels of corrupt within regional states, where local-level graft may not easily be contained by the central government. Simply put, localized corruption might have deeper and more sophisticated roots that might be *invisible* to the federal authorities since they operate from the center. For instance, the Transparency International corruption perceptions report of 2024 suggests that Ethiopia ranks among the most corrupt countries in the world with an index score of 37 out of 100. Furthermore, the same report provides a grim view of corruption in Ethiopia: that the vice is getting worse, with a score of 39 out of 100 in

2021 having dropped to a score of 37 out of 100 in 2024. The current score places Ethiopia 99th out of 180 countries (Corruption Perceptions Index, 2024). More worryingly, Ethiopia's score of 37 out of 100 falls below the global average score of 43 out of 100, i.e., the number 100 represents a clean slate on corruption, while the number 0 represents a high corruption score. In the past fifteen years, Ethiopia has failed to reach the average score of 43 (Ethiopian Policy Institute, 2025).

Patrick Lumumba, a law professor, argues that African voters tend to elect leaders with weak leadership skills, and when they fail to deliver, voters, paradoxically, wonders why. Lumumba's contention is that citizens have a civic duty to elect office bearers whose character traits inspire development, rather than simply voting for the highest bidder (Reel Spill TV, November 20, 2022).

There is also a correlation between higher levels of corruption and a poor record on human rights. Akere Muna, Chair of the International Anti-Corruption Conference Council, points out that corruption is the key factor that is impeding development, not just in Ethiopia but across Sub-Saharan Africa, especially through insidious private sector corruption as well as state capture corruption (Channels Television, 2017). The Ethiopian Policy Institute (2025) identifies the following governance gaps that are hampering the fight against graft: (a) erosion of the rule of law and impunity among the political ruling elites

and their cronies (b) a weak anti-corruption institution with no effective mechanism for whistleblower protection (c) access to justice seems only available to the highest bidder, (d) muzzling the press and a crackdown on civil society activities.

Simuziya (2021, p.107) argues that in a democratic model, if a government is undermining the rule of law and cannot guarantee the rights and safety of its population, then it will have, by default, undermined its sovereignty claims. Over time, a cocktail of bad governance practices increases the propensity for nationalist agitation and calls for self-rule by ethnic minorities who note that under those governance conditions, their marginalization becomes more entrenched.

The issue of governance is a matter that must be interrogated by Ethiopian society, particularly by two classes of groups that are more empowered and influential than ordinary citizens; that is, the scholars and politicians. Thirty years after its formation, the apparent failure of the federal system to deliver tangible goods to the population can be explained by the orientation of people in terms of what they tolerate as normal practices. For instance, corruption, lack of accountability, intolerance, a propensity for violence, and lack of transparency should not be accepted as societal virtues.

Peniaz et al. (2025) argue that while corruption is generally viewed (across the globe) as harmful to society, not much attention has been paid to

understanding the social and economic dynamics that allow this vice to thrive. For many ordinary people who see their opportunities closed and their future uncertain, corruption becomes a tool that provides a window of opportunity to experience a better life. In other words, marginalization and closed opportunities for many are issues that push them to engage in corrupt activities. Thus, to eradicate corruption, efforts must be directed towards policies that minimize or eliminate the conditions that create both the incentive and the opportunities that incline people to engage in corrupt activities.

Analyzing this governance problem from a Marxist perspective, Griffen (2025, pp. 9-10) puts this debate in perspective by arguing that in slave-holding polities, the revolts of the oppressed did not lead to meaningful changes. For the slave owners (or imperialists), they saw advantages of slavery in labor productivity, where cheap labor provided them with colossal profits in the same way that today, Western civilization continues to exploit subaltern regions. As a result of oppression and state capture of subaltern polities, Western development increases, which is beneficial not only to their populations but also to the elite subaltern traitors who, in the first instance, are the ones who covertly sell out their people, their land, and their natural resources. Accordingly, all beneficiaries of imperialism, slavery, and neocolonialism, who ironically include some African ruling elites, find themselves supporting and formulating policies

that continue to undermine the dignity of ordinary Africans. For them as accomplices, the anti-imperialist revolution loses its meaning.

Thus, the exploitation of the oppressed African masses by the ruling elites is sustained only through greater participation of regime cronies who band together to continue reaping from those imperial spoils through client-patron systems. These gate-keeping syndicates or cartels significantly reduce the ability of the oppressed masses to proactively oppose those oppressive neocolonial policies. The key point of discussion here is that much of today's misgovernance in African polities is associated with the problems of foreign meddling and imperial exploitation of Africa's natural resources, where African ruling elites themselves are complicit in these scams.

However, this does not provide an excuse for the peasants/ordinary people to sit back and do nothing, for they have an inherent human right, individually and collectively, to oppose and reject oppressive and imperialist rules through all forms of civil disobedience. It can be inferred from Joireman (1997, pp. 387-388) that at the core of every democracy lies an irrefutable principle: power belongs to the people, and no matter how oppressive a regime might be, ultimately, it is the people who must decide the regime's fate. It is on this premise that the notion that ordinary people have no power to rewrite their history is challenged. The fall of empires and notorious regimes that previously oppressed subaltern populations is a reminder of the

inherent power of ordinary people as the real owners of the state.

Assessing the Sustainability of Ethiopian Ethnic Federalism

A notable achievement of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia is that federalism has created a platform of autonomy for ethnic groups to use their languages in schools as well as in official administration of their regions. This move enhances equality based on mutual reciprocity. Significantly, language independence has also meant that the political machinery cannot use language as a rallying call for secessionist causes or as a tool to further the ambitions of certain political figures (Habtu, 2003). Further, the idea that to date, various ethnicities seem to prefer to live along ethnic federal lines (despite some setbacks) shows that federalism as a concept has been largely accepted by the population (Amsalu, 2014, p.72). By institutionalizing ethnicity, the post-1991 framework successfully transformed Ethiopia from a 'prison house of nationalities' to a state that embraces diversity through linguistic and cultural autonomy. This new era of decentralization and devolved social service delivery has since resulted in significant socioeconomic advances. Also, federalism, through fiscal autonomy, has aided the expansion of infrastructure and economic corridors to promote regional integration and trade. Overhauling the identity question, which previously was a source of marginalization and discrimination, is a laudable achievement.

Despite the benefits that are associated with a federal state system, such a system may also be prone to more bureaucratic processes, leading to inefficiencies. For instance, Ayele (2014) argues that for many years, the now-defunct ruling EPRDF political party (replaced by the Prosperity Party in 2019) seemed preoccupied with establishing local government units based on ethnic lines because it was seen as an effective way of managing ethnic conflicts. But, over time, the emphasis on ethnicity as a key variable proved to be a futile venture as it tended to create inefficiency in service delivery because tribal identity gradually began to shape opportunity and security. Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia has institutionalised ethnic groups as core constituents of the state, which means that ethnic groups are social strands that are distinct from the umbrella category of citizenship. Because of ethnic federalism, the idea of citizens identifying themselves merely as 'Ethiopian' seems to be seen as something that is incomplete unless it is accompanied by an ethnic regional connotation. As such, this atmosphere contributes to fears among people of possible ethnic frictions that could lead to state instability (Habtu, 2003, pp. 22-24).

Despite its progressive principles and being a pillar of the federal system, the Ethiopian Federal Constitution (1995) seems to suffer a legitimacy problem, whereby some Ethiopians view it with contempt which arises from a notion that not all citizens were allowed to genuinely participate in

its formulation. In this way, it can be argued that the Federal Constitution appears to symbolize idealism, hence manifesting itself merely as a marriage of convenience between the center and the periphery, rather than as a federal constitution of substance.

A notable governance challenge within the political establishment is that the ruling Prosperity Party seems to carry one-party dispositional characteristics, which might explain its failure to be embraced in some regions, such as Tigray. The failure by the ruling party to demonstrate harmony and genuine inclusive governance within its ranks could signal that certain groups do not wholly trust the party's underlying motives (Aalen, 2002). It is argued that the EPRDF (compared to the current Prosperity Party) was a more 'regionalized' party that ensured that its affiliates in various regions channeled their grievances through the EPRDF regional structures. But after its dissolution in 2019, the political landscape seemed to have changed for the worse regarding regional affiliation to the ruling party (Ezega News, 2019). Thus, on the question of genuine autonomy of regional states, although the regional states have the power to formulate their own policies and development programs, including land administration, such laws and policies must conform to the Federal laws. Also, regional autonomy, overall, is somewhat curtailed when it comes to legislative independence because the power to formulate laws is vested only in the

House of People's Representatives (HPR). Furthermore, the control of revenue sources, although permitted in regional states, remains the domain of the Federal authorities (Gebeye, 2023, pp. 170-171).

Yimenu (2024, p. 6) points out that although federalism has facilitated plurality in linguistic and cultural practices, it has not succeeded in removing exclusionary tendencies that would ensure that various ethnicities have equal access to central power.

Also, certain ethnic groups have not exercised their full rights due to the perceived repressive one-party rule tendencies of the Federal government. For instance, Amsalu (2014, pp. 86-87) argues that although land ownership rights on pastoral and peasantry farming are guaranteed in the Federal Constitution, such rights are not always implemented, and this leads to some ethnic minorities feeling excluded in economic relations. These concerns about the dominance of the ruling party have contributed to weak federal democratic values. Therefore, contestations over territory continue to be prevalent due to the impression that the central government itself lacks *legitimacy*, and this challenge can be attested, for instance, by the fact that to date, the territorial disputes between Tigray and Amhara regions have not been fully resolved by the Federal government. Attempts by the Federal government to empower certain groups over others have also emerged, and the subsequent increase in demands by other ethnic

groups for autonomy, even where some groups have smaller populations. For instance, the states of Harari and Gambela have around 600,000 and 300,000 people, respectively, compared to the states of Oromia (with over 60 million people) and Amhara (with over 41 million people) (Worldometer, 2025).

Further, the Tigray war (2020-2022) between the central government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) considerably weakened the legitimacy of the central government (both at home and abroad) as it failed to manage a conflict with one of its regional states (Jalu & Simuziya, 2025). Additionally, in 2023, the central government declared a state of emergency in the Amhara region after the paramilitary factions joined hands with the Fano militia and started fighting the government. Other failures of the central government in managing conflicts were shown elsewhere in the same year of 2023, where the central government launched a campaign against the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) after their peace talks collapsed. The skirmishes in Oromia point to a region that is seeking full autonomy rather than cosmetic autonomy (Yimenu, 2024). These examples highlighted above indicate that the Ethiopian federal system has not succeeded in reducing conflicts.

Although some contend that it exacerbates tensions and may ultimately cause disintegration, the current government has embraced the system as a new method of settling disputes and averting

state disintegration because unity cannot be established without the voluntary federation and guarantee of the right to self-determination. Gradually, this system kept posing problems. Its incapacity to fully settle disputes is one of Ethiopian federalism's main problems. The recurrent ethnic-related civil conflicts have been observed throughout the nation, including the frequent skirmishes in Benishangul-Gumuz, the Oromo and Somali areas, the Amhara and Tigray regions, the Oromia and SNNP region, and others. Articles 39 and 62 of the FDRE Constitution of 1995 outline a clear framework for holding a referendum to settle such conflicts, but in Western Tigray, this protocol was disregarded (Bizuneh, 2025).

The discrepancy between the constitution and the actual application of political rights presents a major challenge in Ethiopia. For instance, political repression has prevented some ethnic groups from exercising their full rights. One ethnic group's dominance of every federal unit led to a polarizing politics that separated 'natives' from 'newcomers,' making the latter the victims of the former. In this way, ethnic groups in the nation feel that they are either empowered or disempowered by ethnic federalism (Semir, 2019). Furthermore, federalism has also had difficulty striking a balance between defending the rights of non-territorial ethnic minorities and granting autonomy to territorial ethnic groups. With regional constitutions identifying some groups as the legitimate proprietors and others

as 'non-titular', most territories are ethnically defined. Minorities who live outside of their assigned home regions have frequently been displaced due to tensions caused by this structure, which has widened ethnic divides. This has something to do with Amhara nationalism's ascent, which has accelerated since the ascendancy to power of Abiy Ahmed. Where the Qemant ethnic group is based (in Northwestern Ethiopia), violence is a result of conflicting expectations between them and Amhara nationalist elites. Additionally, this intensified the Amhara-Tigrayan nationalist argument, which is linked to shifting power structures, contested lands, and allegations of proxy conflicts (Africa Intelligence, 2025).

Overall, the federal accomplishments are overshadowed by a series of fragile equilibriums; the mechanisms intended to accommodate ethnic identity have frequently reinforced cleavage and incentivized violent conflict. Crucially, the absence of a neutral judicial arbitrator is central to this systemic instability, as constitutional interpretation is still left to the House of Federation (HOF), a political rather than a legal entity. Furthermore, this continuous vertical imbalance makes regional states heavily reliant on federal grants, giving the central government a lever of control – the control which otherwise undermines de facto subnational authority. Thus, although there are some successes that Ethiopia has achieved due to the federal system, there have also been major challenges, especially

concerning the gap between theory and practice, i.e., the contrast between the constitutional provisions that guarantee citizens' rights and the actual implementation of those rights.

Problematising the Ethnic Federal Model

Although federalism is designed to empower minorities and marginalized populations, the model itself tends to be a self-defeating concept because along the way, it (unwittingly) institutionalizes division and incentivizes ethnic political competitions. In this section, we highlight several problems associated with ethnic federalism, but which do not appear obvious on face value.

Under an ethnic federal system, each territory is defined by a specific ethnic group, making people outside of those territorial boundaries feel unwelcome. The irony is that those territorial borders are artificial in the sense that historically, people from either side of the borders often share the same cultural and tradition lineages. Because ethnicity is exploited as a core organizing framework, ethnic boundaries become more entrenched (Mesfin, 2017; Fessha, 2017).

Another concern is that budgetary funding from the central government to various regions is tied to the identity of each region. This means that development agendas such as job allocations, or funding of local ventures are programmed along ethnic connections, whereby any person outside of that region is seen as an alien, outsider, or intruder, who does not deserve to take part in

those regional budgets. Because resources are seen to have ethnic connotations, it is possible to have inter-ethnic troubles emerging over resource allocation arising from the perception that other groups may be posing existential threats (Gidron & Shayo, 2026; Keen & Strong, 2026).

What is also troubling about ethnic federalism is that the Ethiopian constitution permits ethnic groups (nationalities) the right to self-determination. Because of this 'freedom' to secede, various nationalist groups weaponize this loophole to persistently subvert the authority of the federal government. For instance, people prioritize their regional and ethnic identity over key affiliations such as the shared Ethiopian citizenship. In this way, ethnic federalism damages national solidarity and collective national values which makes consensus more difficult to attain on critical national matters (ACCORD, 2020; Mehari, 2020).

Overall, ethnic federalism's main setback is the idea that it puts people into categories of 'dominant' and 'minority' groups. This means that minorities living in regions dominated by dominant groups, do not have sufficient assurances of effective protection against disenfranchisement practices such as displacement and cultural assimilation tactics (Berhanu, 2025).

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the ontology and dynamics of the Ethiopian federal system and assess its sustainability. In 1995, the Ethiopian Federal Constitution was enacted as a response to many years of a centralized state power structure. However, the Ethiopian federal system has worked as a contradictory project. While it has achieved certain goals such as offering autonomy to ethnic groups to use their local languages in schools and official regional administration. In this way, the previously marginalized groups have been empowered through decentralization. However, the same advantages of ethnic autonomy that federalism has brought have also cultivated a culture of insecurity and violence because people now identify much more with their regional ethnic identity rather than with the Ethiopian state.

The recurrent ethnic-related civil conflicts testify to that, and thus, violence and instability have lowered the value of federalism. The Ethiopian Federal Constitution provision to secede seems to have opened a Pandora's box as it seems to reward ethnic outbidding instead of awarding collaboration. The other challenge has to do with the fact that the political party in power has tended to centralize power, thereby defeating the very purpose of decentralization. As such, grey areas remain unresolved within the democratic architecture of the Ethiopian political system. Overall, in practice, Ethiopia exhibits a disposition of a centralized structure rather than

a decentralized system. Under the circumstances, it is imperative that appointments to central government positions be more inclusive to reflect the incorporation of marginalized regional ethnicity.

On whether the federal system has achieved its lofty goals, this study finds that although the federal system has not produced the desired results thus far, the federal structure, being a work in progress, holds some promise. This promise can be realized especially if democracy prevails and strong institutions are established. This will require that the central government cedes more powers to the regions to allow them to be innovative because the more the regions become fully autonomous, the less they will depend on the central government for regional development. Ultimately, if the ongoing National Dialogue achieves true inclusivity, it may construct a new social contract, otherwise without such institutional recalibrations, Ethiopia risks further state disintegration.

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