

## The Politics of Ethnic Identity and Conflicts under Ethnic Federal System in Ethiopia

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### ABSTRACT

The study examined identity politics and conflict under ethnic federal system in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) has instituted ethnic federal system along with ethnic right to self-determination up to secession. The federal system is explicitly based on ethnicity that formalized identity politics in the post 1990s. The quest for an anatomy of conflicts in pre- and post-federal Ethiopia leads one to clearly understand the nature of political relations in historic and contemporary Ethiopia. The historic root of formalized identity politics and ethnic rights to self-determination under ethnic federal system goes back to the politico-ideological agenda of National Questions by Ethiopian Student Movements (ESM) in the 1960s. The formalized identity politics altered conflicts causes, goals and nature in Ethiopia. The study concluded that ethnic federal system and ethnic rights to self-determination up to secession has neither led to ethnic political autonomy nor ended secessionist conflicts in Ethiopia.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Federal System, Identity Politics, New War Theory, Boundary Conflicts, Ethnic Autonomy Conflicts and Pan- Ethiopian Identity

### INTRODUCTION

At the end of the Cold War, the socialist military regime in Ethiopia was overthrown by ethno-nationalist armed forces. A political regime that came to power in 1991 has adopted a federal system, which is explicitly based on ethnicity, to radically reconstruct the Ethiopian state as a multi-ethnic federation. This federal system was adopted as a response to 'old' ethno-nationalist armed conflicts that be leaguered the old regime and has helped to successfully pacify such conflicts from national scene in the post 1990s (Aalen 2006; Tsegay 2010). With the introduction of ethnic federalism in contrast to authoritarian and socialist unitary state, the politics of ethnicity was formally institutionalized.

Consistent to this, the 'New Wars' theory describes that 'the new identity politics arises out of the collapse of the communist state and the disintegration of centralized authoritarian modern state structure' (Kaldor 2006:81-82). While ethnic federal system helps to deal with some old ethnic armed conflicts, it triggered some other (new) conflicts in Ethiopia. New post federal conflicts have emerged and dimension of conflicts has also changed (Assefa 2012; Tsegay 2010). This identity politics has therefore entirely altered the conflict dynamics,

goal and nature. In view of this, it is now possible to consider the contemporary conflicts in Ethiopia in the categories of the 'New Wars' perspective. The key objective of this study is to analyze conflicts induced by politicized ethnicity after adopting ethnic federal system in Ethiopia in light of the 'New Wars' thesis.

Methodologically, the study was an empirical analysis of nature and dynamics of conflicts under ethnic federal system and politicized ethnicity in Ethiopia since 1991. The study used multiple methods of data collection: qualitative face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions, document analysis and review of secondary sources.

The researcher made several field trips to cities and towns for data collection. He held interviews with key informants, as well as conducted focus group discussions in capital city of Addis Ababa, Regional capital city of Hawassa and Zonal cities of Arba Minch, Hossana, Wolaita-Sodo, Wolkite, Sawola and in some selected woredas since April 2015. Many subjects were involved in the research, including traditional leaders, elders, religious leaders, youth, women and government officials from local to federal levels. Informants have been kept anonymous due to the sensitivity of the study issues.

The coverage of the points described, the paper is organized into the following sections and sub-sections. The first section of this paper briefly examines the major tenets of 'New Wars' thesis. In the second section, the study scrutinizes the historic 'making and re-making' of the Ethiopian state to understand the current formalized identity politics and changes and continuities in the patterns of 'old' and current conflicts in Ethiopia. The current conflicts are thematically analyzed in the third section of the study. The last section of the paper presents concluding remark that focuses on the summary of evaluation of the main assumptions of the 'New Wars' in light of conflicts set in the Ethiopian context.

### A New Wars Theory: A Theoretical Framework

It is often argued that the new wars are consequences of the end of the Cold War. The discrediting of socialist ideology, disintegration of the totalitarian empires and the withdrawal of the super powers support to client regimes following the end of Cold War contributed in important ways to the new wars (Kaldor 2006). Kaldor argues that 'the new wars can be contrasted with earlier wars in terms of their goals, the methods of warfare and how they are financed' (2006:7). The structural transformation of old wars is a consequence of a radical change in the goals of new wars. The goals of the new wars are about identity politics in contrast to the geo-political or ideological goals of the earlier wars (Kaldor 2006). In the new wars, the political goals are about the claim to power on the basis of identities. The groups involved in the new wars also define themselves on the basis of their identities - national, ethnic, religious or cultural character (Kaldor 2006).

Furthermore, the sources of the new identity politics are linked to globalization, rapid urbanization and the parallel economy. Kaldor further points that 'the collapse of communist states after 1991 and the disintegration or erosion of modern state structure, especially centralized authoritarian state provide the environment in which the new identity politics are nurtured' (2006:81-2). Kaldor attributes 'the growth in the identity politics to lack of politics of ideas i.e. lack of forward looking projects' (2006: 81). In contrast to politics of ideas, identity politics tends to be fragmentative, backward looking and exclusive. The new wars are increasingly internal, intense and protracted in contrast to inter-state old wars. The new wars

do not typically have a precise beginning and formal declarations of war in contrast to the structured conduct of 'old' wars. They conspicuously lack definitive battles, decisive campaigns and formal endings (Kaldor 2006).

With respect to Africa, Kaldor has emphasized the unique aspects of conflicts sets in the African context (2006). The African context brings into consideration several other aspects of conflicts. The African states have to deal with the disillusion of post-independence hopes and problems of internal security such as rapid urbanization and still present poverty and inequality. Furthermore, Kaldor accentuates that 'the contemporary violence in Africa is a reaction of the established political elites to the declining legitimacy and growing inability to cope with problematic issues' (2006: 78-81). However, the 'New Wars' thesis disregard a few aspects of conflicts set in African context (Malantowicz 2010). Unlike Europe, Africa still lacks democracy and political pluralism. As a result, the ideological agenda is still present in violent struggles in Africa.

According to critics, 'the description of 'New Wars' is in fact only a new name for different types of 'old' wars' (Berdal 2003:78-81). In the same vein, Newman has mentioned that 'the distinction between 'contemporary' forms of conflict and wars of earlier times is exaggerated and in some instances does not stand up to scrutiny, especially when drawing upon historical material' (2004:173).

In addition, Newman questions the extent to which the contemporary forms of organized violence reflect new patterns in terms of actors, objectives, spatial context, human impact, and the political economy and social structure of conflict (2004).

The tendency in the new wars scholarship to identify common patterns in 'contemporary' civil conflicts ignores important differences among them (Newman 2004). The 'New Wars' thesis rather reflect types of conflict that are not particularly 'modern', and in fact reflect rather enduring patterns over the last century. Newman concluded that 'we would not be able to present a sustained, linear pattern in the contemporary conflicts' rather 'the changes in the pattern of the conflicts are most obviously noticeable on a case-by-case base' (2004: 186). Berdal also draws attention to lack of a proper historical perspective in the 'New Wars' thesis as a major limitation' (2003).

### Formalized Identity Politics Seen through A Historic 'Making and Re-Making' of Modern Ethiopia

It is obvious that any attempt to understand the post 1990s identity politics or politicized ethnicity would be incomplete if it is seen separately from the historical trajectories that shaped the modern Ethiopian state since the late 19<sup>th</sup>c. To fully understand anatomy of conflicts in the pre-and post 1990s, it is necessary to address myself to one question: Why and how the state building process in the late 19<sup>th</sup> left the seeds of future conflict? In response to this question, I briefly explore the historical process which led to the creation of modern Ethiopian state and the outcome of those processes in terms of ethnicity (historical factors for adopting ethnic federal system and formalizing identity politics in the post 1990s) in the current Ethiopia.

Ethiopia is considered as an ancient state with a three millennia history of state hood (Bahru 2002; Mengisteab 1997). However, Ethiopia took its modern shape in the first decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the Europeans' scramble for Africa in the 1880s, the Abyssinian Empire was also busy in an empire - building project launched by its architect, King Menelik of Shawa – later Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia (Teshale 1995). Emperor Menelik II was considered as the only black African leader who actively participated in the scramble for Africa. Through the conquest, the greater portion of the country's land mass was incorporated into the empire and gave its present geographical shape and cultural, linguistic and ethnic compositions by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hameso 2001). The autonomous smaller states of south, south-west, and south-eastern Ethiopia were subdued by Emperor Menelik II as a result of unbalanced military power despite fierce resistance by many of these states (Vaughan 2003; Yishak 2008). The net effect of the process of state formation put various ethno-linguistic groups under the newly created state of Ethiopia which is now a multi-ethnic state where more than 80 linguistic and ethnic groups live.

The end of the conquest was followed by the institutionalization of the northern feudal system of exploitation, conquest of lands and the imposition of the *Amhara* language, religion, and other forms of culture at the expense of the indigenous practices of subjugated peoples (Teshale 1995). Like its predecessors, Emperor

*Haileselassie I* (1930- 1974) continued a project of building 'one nation out of many' through cultural homogenization through policies of assimilation, centralization and one language policy by adopting the first modern constitution in 1931 (Yishak 2008). According to John Markakis (1994:227), 'it was easier for a non-Christian, who also did not speak Amharigna, to pass through the eye of a needle than to enter the charmed circle of power and privilege'. Markakis has further noted that understandably 'Amhara ruling elites' perception of national identity was the mirror image of their ethnic and cultural ego' (1994: 225). This argument is further supported by Poluha noting that:

*'...never the less, a person aspiring to power had to be a man who had mastered Amharigna, adhered to [Orthodox] Christianity and had developed a good relationship with a powerful patron'* (Poluha 1998:31).

In equality based on ethnic affinity had been a part of Ethiopian governance since the establishment of the modern state. The Amhara has been perceived as the ruling group and the Ethiopian national identity was therefore intrinsically linked to the Amhara (Aalen 2006). Hence, ethnic diversity had been totally denied recognition. It was ethnically based historical injustices and inequality that triggered the subjugated peoples to revitalize their ethnic identity and to articulate ethnic-based political movements against the Amhara elites' hegemony since 1960s (Bassi 1996; Hameso 2001). It was the deep-rooted problem spear headed by Ethiopian Student Movements (ESM) <sup>1</sup> that finally led to the 1974 popular revolution<sup>2</sup>, which overthrew emperor *Haileselassie I* from power. None the less, in the absence of organized political parties to assume power, the military took advantage of the political vacuum and controlled state power. Notwithstanding the military regime's attempts to reorganize the country's internal administration after its establishment of People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) in 1987, it was failed to create a new social and political basis for the country (Clapham 1994). The 1974 popular revolution was basically the result of the ESM which begun in 1960's. Influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideology, students of Addis Ababa University (AAU) brought forward the issue of *National Question*<sup>3</sup>. Besides, the idea of the right of 'nations, Nationalities and Peoples (NNPs)' to self-determination including secession had also dominated the political agendas of the ESM (Walelegn 1969; Yishak

2008). This political ideological agenda became a driving revolutionary force in the Student circles and of the ethno-nationalist movements which were descendants of ESM - such as, the Eritrean People Liberation Front (EPLF), Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF), Sidama Liberation Front (SLF), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and of the Pan-Ethiopianist movements, like Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and All Ethiopian Socialist Movement known popularly as *MEISON* (Merera 2003; Young 1997). The ESM itself was divided on the issue of *National Question*. Some groups of students started to contend that the issue that needs to be addressed in the Ethiopian politics is the idea of *class* struggle but not *National Question*. This debate led to the birth of two contending political groups: Pan-Ethiopianist groups (Class based movements) and Ethno-nationalist groups (ethnic based movements).

The ethno-nationalist groups were dominantly represented by EPLF, TPLF, SLF and OLF. As a descendant of the ESM, the ethno-nationalist groups were organized on the ideological foundation of Marxist-Leninist principle of the 'right to self-determination including secession' as a driving revolutionary force (Merera 2003; Vaughan 2003). They 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. Furthermore, 'the EPLF and OLF emphasized that the Ethiopian state had 'colonized'<sup>6</sup> various ethnic groups. Hence, Ethiopia, just like any western colonial empire, needs to undergo decolonization (Alem 2005; Asnake, 2013). Ethnicity became an aspect of the political movements. By considering the Ethiopian state as a 'colonial' empire, the EPLF and OLF opted for complete independence consecutively of Eritrea and Oromia from Ethiopia.

Never the less, the TPLF oscillated in their agenda between complete independence from Ethiopia and its self-determination with in the greater Ethiopian context. This self-determination agenda by the TPLF could result in anything from autonomy, federation, confederation, up to and including independence (Markakis 1987; Young 1997). The most protracted and Africa's longest intra-state civil wars (a 30 years' war by EPLF) was ended in 1991 by the secession of Eritrea and the control of state power by ethno-nationalist forces led by TPLF<sup>4</sup> / EPRDF forces after hard-won victory over the military regime (Temesgen 2011). Now, the political pendulum of the

country swung towards identity politics under the political order of ethnic federal system in the country.

In 1995, the EPRDF adopted a new constitution that brought a fundamental transformation in the political philosophy as antithesis to ethnic assimilation policy and marginalization by old regimes. A new political regime has instituted, as its ideological bedrock, ethnic-based federal system around Marxist-Leninist principle of ethnic right to self-determination up to secession (Art.39/1) as a fundamental response to a longstanding *National Questions* since 1960 and as a response to prolonged ethno-nationalist conflicts in Ethiopia (Vaughan 2003:169; Tsegay 2010:85). In stark contrast to socialist and dictatorial strong unitary past, ethnic-based federal system has formalized politics of ethnicity.

This is consistent to the 'New Wars' thesis which depicts that the new identity politics arises out of disintegration of centralized authoritarian and communist states. Accordingly, the origins of the current formalizing identity politics has rooted in the ethno-nationalist liberationist rhetoric as a remedy to past historical trajectories that had brought *National Questions* as a politico-ideological agenda in Ethiopia since 1960s. It should be from this historical perspective that the current identity politics could be better understood in Ethiopia.

Consequently, at the foot heel of the federal dispensation were born current conflicts, post-federal conflicts in Ethiopia. Ethnic federal system was both a response to 'old' ethno-nationalist armed struggle and a cause of current ethnic-identity based conflicts (Tsegay 2010). It was effectively addressed 'old' conflicts from national scene.

However, it is proliferating localized conflicts at national and local levels (Aalen 2006). This indicates that out of the solutions for 'old' conflicts, current post federal conflicts are born. Post federal conflicts are ethnic identity based conflicts for new power, new resources, and new opportunities. It is viewed by different scholars, (Such as, Aalen 2006; Abbink 2006; Asnake 2010; Tsegay 2010; Temesgen 2011), that there are now new demands for a distinct ethnic identity, self-governance and autonomy, local economic justice, political empowerment and participation, state hood, territory and disputes over boundary. The underlying causes of contemporary conflicts, which are the subject of this paper, emerge out of the problems of

state reconstruction by ethnic federal restructuring, politicized ethnicity and ethnic elite's political economy.

The current conflicts are localized, ethnic identity based, dispersed and low intensity conflicts in contrast to previously organized large scale ethno-nationalist armed conflicts. Corresponding to the major tenets of the 'New War' hypothesis, the current conflicts do not have a precise beginning and no formal declarations. They are non-ideological except ethnic secessionist armed struggle by Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). In contrast to the 'New War' thesis, current ethnic identity-based conflicts cannot be departed from pre-1991 political processes and historical trajectories that shaped modern Ethiopian state. Therefore, the study does not suggest that contemporary conflicts are distinct from the past in Ethiopia.

### The Identity Politics and Conflicts in Ethiopia

The history of the Ethiopian state has been characterized as the history of conflicts (Merera 2003). The conflicts that pre-dominated the political terrain of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had class, ethnic, religious and regional dimensions. The EPRDF's radical policy initiative i.e. ethnic federal model and formalizing self-determination including secession are response to 'old' ethno-nationalist civil wars that are leaguered the previous regimes. Certainly, these radical EPRDF policies responded and helped to pacify 'old' armed conflicts. Currently, there exists no large scale armed conflicts at national scene that beleaguer the state and the political center in contrast to previous system.

The current conflicts are no more national ailments except secessionist struggle by OLF and ONLF. The politics of ethnicity has transformed and generated localized ethnic conflicts. The conflicts are devolved from national scene of earlier periods to current sub-national and local levels (Abbink 2006). The study informants reported that localized conflicts are characterized by conflicts of low intensity, fragmentation and identity politics and ethnic elites' entrepreneur ships or political economy. Although the identity based conflicts are closely inter-related and should be viewed holistically, attempt has been made to the matically categorize the current conflicts for analytical purpose. The first category is the *ethnic based boundary conflicts* within and

between regional states. Second category is *ethnic autonomy conflict* that refers, in the context of this study, conflicts that emerge on a range of issues, such as ethnic quest for distinct ethnic identity, for self-rule at regional and sub-regional level, competition for control over regional power, resources and opportunities, competition for access to and control over cities or towns from federal to local levels and ethno-nationalist secessionist struggle and the third category is *pan-Ethiopian identity conflict* that refers to conflicts due to lack of overarching and inclusive pan-national identity and creation of ethno-political boundaries that exclude people on the basis of their identity.

### Ethnic Based Administrative Boundary Conflicts

The highly centralized system has been replaced by ethnic based federal arrangement that established nine ethnically and territorially delimited regional states: Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Harari, Oromia, Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS) and Somali. These regional states are basically demarcated on the basis of 'settlement patterns, identity, language and consent of the people concerned' (Art. 46/2). This constitutional principle has made regional and sub-regional administrative boundaries to coincide with ethnic identity. However, every ethnic group is not found inhabiting a territorially concentrated or defined geographic area in Ethiopia (Assefa 2007). The process of matching ethnic identity and politico administrative boundary ignores a history of strong unitary system.

Moreover, this ethnic-based federal structuring as an assemblage of distinct ethnic group with distinct territory is considered as problematic. This is because ethnic groups in Ethiopia had become interspersed for long years through diverse and long-standing patterns of settlement (Clapham 2002; Vaughan 2003).

In this regard, Assefa's summary is also worth to mention here: '*...there has been a long process of inter-ethnic integration in Ethiopia, so much so that today a considerable proportion of the Ethiopian peoples' are of mixed ethnic background. As a result, ethnic based federal boundary making seemed in appropriate in a country in which substantial portions of the population are of mixed background, or unsure of which ethnic group they belong to or wish to identity with*' (Assefa 2007:254).

It has been further notified that the Ethiopian history is full of conflicts of one type or another and to single out the issue of nationalities by ethnic based boundary making, therefore, excludes many other essential clauses (Assefa 2007; Asnake 2013). The study respondents also stressed that due to a long history of ethnic mobility, integration and inter-groups relations, the issue of redrawing ethnic based boundaries between groups generated unprecedented and violent ethnic boundary conflicts. Consequently, ethnic re-structuring has radically changed not only governance rhetoric but also the dimension of conflicts in the post 1990s. For the bigger ethnic groups, fitting into the new ethno-federal structure has been relatively straight forward. In contrast, defining the ethnic identity of several smaller ethnic groups has emerged as an arena of local/regional (re-) negotiation of identity, statehood and protracted conflicts throughout Ethiopia.

According to informants, ethnic federal restructuring divided those ethnic groups formerly used to live together and sharing resources into different administrative units. In the same vein, Asnake has noted that ethnic federal system has brought to the politico-legal arena the question of which group belongs to which wider ethnicity (2010). The federal restructuring has created new stranded groups<sup>5</sup>, i.e., ethnic groups that are caught in between two or more regions when the new mapping of the constituent units of the federation was conducted. The inclusion and exclusion of these stranded identity groups in the administrative units dominated and designated by dominant groups has serious implication to resource access, power and opportunity due to their subsumed status.

Regarding the boundary conflicts between regional states, when the disputed areas coincided with the boundaries between regional states, conflicts between ethnic groups have transformed to conflicts between regional states. This is apparent by prolonged boundary conflicts over the ownership of Babile, a town between Oromia and Somali regional states (Assefa 2007; Asnake 2013).

More instances include violent inter-regional ethnic boundary conflicts, among others, between the Borana vs. Gerri in Oromia and Somali regional states; the Afar vs. Issa in the Afar and Somali regional states; the Guji vs. Gedeo in Oromia and SNNPR States; Guji vs. Burji in Oromia and SNNPR states. All these

ethnic-identity conflicts resulted in death of thousands of people, ethnic animosity, inter-regional dispute and destruction of property (Asnake 2010; Asebe 2012; Berhanu 2007).

Some of these inter-regional ethnic boundary conflicts had however a long history that predated the post 1990s political development. For instance, the traditional competitive nature of relationships between the pastoralist Gerri Somali and the Borana Oromo are getting the new dimensions after the establishment of Somali and Oromia Regional states. Their traditional competition over land resources are 'being transformed into modern nation state type boundary conflicts between Oromia and Somali regional states' (Asnake 2004:63). In the same vein, traditional pastoralist afar and Somali clans competitions for resources are being transformed into inter-regional boundary conflicts after ethnic regionalization as Afar and Somali regional states. Moreover, the process of boundary making of the Benishangul- Gumuz region with its Amhara and Oromo neighbors impelled inter-ethnic and inter-regional conflicts (Berhanu 2007). The Gedeo and the Guji did not have a history of protracted conflicts before 1990s. But the regional boundary making between SNNPRS and Ormoia has changed their inter-ethnic relations and engendered in violent conflicts (Asebe 2007).

As emphasized by study informants, the ethnicization of state and territory is not the only underlying cause for boundary conflicts. As the 'New Wars' explains, 'political economy' of current conflicts in Ethiopia are highly decentralized due to ethnic federal system. As suggested by Assefa, ethnic conflicts are often subjected to manipulation by domestic elites for their own political expediency (2007). For instance, a long standing peaceful co-existence between the Guji and Gedeo ethnic groups has changed into a protracted inter-ethnic conflict mainly due to local political elites vying for power (Asebe 2007; Asnake 2010). The ethnic elites gain an advantage in using conflict for their own ends. As a result, they have strong interests in perpetuating some of the conflicts. This is particularly evident in the most prolonged inter-regional ethnic boundary conflicts between the Oromia and Somali Regional states. Consistent with the 'New Wars' thesis, inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts are characteristics of current conflicts in Ethiopia. The current conflicts are mainly caused by the identity politics and instigated by ethnic elites' or group interests and greed.

### Ethnic Autonomy Conflicts

The constitution of 1995 adopted the Soviet practices of hierarchically categorizing its ethnic groups into 'nation', 'nationality' and 'people'. In the ex-Soviet system, Joseph Stalin arranged the numerous Soviet nationalities according to hierarchy of recognition (Allworth 1990). In the multi-level Soviet ethnic federation, the location of the ethnic groups is determined in accordance with this hierarchy of recognition. Edward Allworth has further noted that the process that led to the creation of the Soviet Union as a multi-tiered ethnic federation was not, however, based on ideals of equality or democracy, but upon an order of preferences dictated by factors such as location, size, stability and the dominance in its area by the nationality group (1990). It seems that the ethnic-based territorial organization of Ethiopia's ethnic federalism seemed to have influenced by the Soviet experience of 'multi-tiered' ethnic federation.

In the FDRE constitution, ethnic group is labeled as 'Nation, Nationality and Peoples' (in Amharic, *behieroch, behiereseboch, ena hezboch*). These terms are a predominant one in the current Ethiopian political and constitutional legal rhetoric. The FDRE constitution (art.39/5) defines a 'Nation, Nationality and People' (NNP) as clearly distinguishable cultural groups akin to the primordial assumption of ethnicity. From constitutional definition, one can identify a number of primordialist traits attributed to ethnicity in the context of Ethiopia: a) people; b) culture or custom; c) language; d) belief in common or related identity; e) psychological makeup; and f) territory. Accordingly, ethnic group in Ethiopia can be defined as people with their own common culture or custom, language, identity, psyche, and contiguous territory. The constitution provides a single definition and no distinction is made between these distinct terms 'Nation', 'Nationality' and 'People'.

Implicitly, this categorization indicates a hierarchy among ethnic groups in Ethiopia. Within the formalized ethnic politics, any cultural group that wishes to have a self-governing administrative structure needs to be recognized as either 'nation', 'nationality' or 'people'. Accordingly, defining the ethnic identity of several smaller groups has emerged as an arena of (re) negotiation of identity (Asnake 2010). This is particularly evident in the multi-ethnic regional states. The House of Federation (HoF), the upper house that interpret

the constitution, uses the constitutionally stipulated primordial criteria (art.39/5) to determine cultural groups' ethnic status to grant the right to self-determination for those groups fulfilling the criteria the constitution has already set. In other words, political body from outside determine ethnic status and grants the right to self-determination. This was evident in the process of granting separate ethnic status for Silte from Gurage after fierce and violent identity conflict. Under the auspices of House of Federation (HoF), Silte declared an independent ethnic group status by referendum and managed to get their own separate Zone. One can observe clear paradoxical combination between instrumental uses and primordial definition of ethnicity to determine ethnic status and grant the right to self-determination. Granting the right to self-determination for NNPs is not an end in itself in Ethiopia but it is a means for controlling state by the minority political Regime in power since 1991 (Aalen 2008).

Nine regional states were established each with legislative, executive and judiciary branches. Broader political autonomy is granted including the right to secede from the federation (art.47/2). The state sovereignty is vested on the nations' nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia. This, however, departs from the traditional trends of ascribing sovereignty to the 'people' in general. Theoretically, nations', nationalities and peoples' are granted the right to self-determination up to secession; granted the right to develop language, culture and history; recognized the right to a full measure of self-governance (at the local level); accorded the right to fair and equitable representation at the federal and regional governments (art.39/1-4). Territorially concentrated smaller ethnic groups that are currently not granted the rights to self-rule are allowed to establish separate self-governance to establish separate regional state or they have the right to establish separate statehood at any time.

Due to decision by vanguard EPRDF party at the centre to determine ethnic identity status and the right to self-governance, there are some paradoxes that are still difficult to explain. There has not been an attempt to allow ethnic groups to decide on their own identity and their right to self-determination. It is rather the 'vanguard party that grant from outside the right to self-determination for ethnic groups' (Aalen 2008:71-3). As reported by study respondents, in the process of granting the right to self-determination, ethnic equality has been violated

in two ways: first, by imposing identity on the people and arbitrarily creating ethnic regions, and; second, by arbitrarily stratifying ethnic group some at regional level, other at zonal level and still so many others at woreda and *kebele* levels of administrative hierarchy without any clear criteria. The criteria for granting ethnic regional status were very vague and arbitrary and all according to the desire of regime in power. This is evident in the case of tiny minority Hareri regional status and denial of the same right for ethnic groups with over a million populations, such as, Sidama, Gurage, Wolayit and Gamo in Southern Ethiopia. Despite persistent struggle for statehood by Sidama, the government has remained unwilling to address their demand in accordance with the constitutional stipulations.

There are striking similarities in the practice of the Ethiopian federal system to the ex- Soviet Union federation. As noted by Towster (1951), one of the core principles of Soviet federalism is that in theory it provided ethnic self-determination up to secession, but in practice never allowed autonomy beyond culture and language (cited in Asnake 2013). The initial assumption of the Soviet federal system along with the right to self-determination was to bring the different republics together. This recognition of the right to self-determination contributed to bring some republics voluntarily to the Union. Nevertheless, once the Union was established, the right to self-determination was not genuinely implemented due to the democratic centralist approach of the Bolshevik party (Mesfin 2011). These practices were transplanted in federal Ethiopia. Even if Ethiopia's federal constitution recognizes 'unlimited' self-determination like Soviet federation, it is clear from the experience of ethnic federal system that the ethnic regions are not allowed to exercise administrative autonomy let alone secession. The regime in power is using ethnicity and the right to self-determination for political expediency to handle ethnic diversity according to its own desires instead of genuinely empowering ethnic groups in the country. The following statement by Meles Zenawi, the late prime minister and chairman of the EPRDF, seems to corroborate this:

*'There is no way the secession could take place one fine morning simply because the right is embodied in the constitution. As a matter of fact, the secession clause was put into the constitution in order to avoid such an eventuality'* (quoted in Abbink 2006: 394)

According to informants, the government has difficulty in adhering to the constitution to address ethnic demands for autonomy. The EPRDF relies more on a centralized party system than on the federal compact and federal institutions. The government practices democratic centralism and top-down ideology-driven policy and decision making. However, this practice sharply contradicts the constitutionally proclaimed principles of self-rule and state autonomy (Medhane and Young 2003). Consistently, Abbink has further added that 'the specific model of 'revolutionary democracy' officially espoused by the ruling EPRDF, the party built around the TPLF, represents in many ways a contradiction to the proclaimed constitutional principles' (2006:6). Undoubtedly, this will have its own consequence. The federal system and other constitutionally established institutions have not yet well entrenched in Ethiopia.

There is a fear is that 'once the ruling party loses control of power, the fate of the federal system will be uncertain or will wither away with it' (Clapham 2009:191). The EPRDF's power politics has been creating unforeseeable effects that have been difficult for the government to control. The constitutionally promised principles of the right to self-determination and paradoxes associated with its implementation are source of ethnic-based conflicts in the country.

Previously, the administrative structures in the entire country were highly autocratic and centralized. Regional governors and administrators were directly appointed from the center. This is however changed with ethnic federal restructuring. Due to intense inter-ethnic elites' competition to control regional power and resources, violent conflicts were occurred between regional dominant ethnic groups of Nuer vs. Anuak in Gambella; Berta vs. Gumuz in Benishangul-Gumuz and Sidama vs. Wolaita in SNNPRS. For instance, according informants, ethnic elites' from Sidama and Wolaita were violently competing for key posts especially regional presidential post.

Fierce ethnic elites' competition has grown into group competition as result the Sidama and Wolaita groups were entered into inter-ethnic hostility and some time open confrontation at regional capital Hawasa. Because of population size, physical location of regional state in their territory and government refusal allow separate statehood, the Sidama claimed that regional presidential post must be preserved for Sidama.

The competition for access and authority over cities at federal, state, and local levels is another critical challenge of politicized ethnicity. This is evident in the case of the violent conflicts by the Oromo over control of Addis Ababa, the Sidama over control of Hawassa and the frequent conflict between Gurage and Qabena over Walkite town. In SNNPRS, for instance, the federal government attempted to make the regional capital Awassa a federal city, which added a fuel to their longstanding unmet demand for a regional status, was met by violent conflict by Sidama that wanted to keep Awassa as the main city for the Sidama zone. Following frequent violence, the government postponed its decision. In the similar vein, to avoid the conflicts by Oromo that aimed at controlling Addis Ababa, which is found in Oromia regional state territory, the government recognized special interest of Oromo in Addis Ababa administration, and it is now assumed to be taken as administrative center for Oromia Regional state.

The ongoing secessionist war by the ONLF and OLF is a paradox in a country where there is constitutional recognition of the right to secession. Although the Constitution provides all nationalities with the right to secession, it is apparent that this right would not be allowed to be exercised under the current regime (Aalen 2006; Asnake 2013). Thus politic of ethnicity and formalized right to secession neither led to ethnic political autonomy nor ended secessionist conflicts in Ethiopia.

The continuing of secessionist conflicts shows that the issue of ethnic identity and political ideology are going beyond history and they still remain underlying causes of conflicts in Ethiopia in contrast to the main assumption of the 'New Wars' thesis. The autonomy conflicts are very complex in terms of issues and actors involved. Structural factors and engagement of ethnic elites in the political economies of conflicts are the underlying causes of conflicts. Consistent with 'New Wars' hypothesis, ethnic elites' exclusive focus on their identity based group interests and their greed are making negotiations and compromises very difficult in Ethiopia. As the theory explains, ethnic elites' are engaged in the political economies of conflicts or ethnic elites' entrepreneurship which are highly decentralized under ethnic decentralization.

### **Pan-Ethiopian Identity Politics and Conflicts**

In the pre-1990s, the key to get access to central resources was to acquire an 'All- Ethiopian'

identity and be assimilated into the central culture by learning the Amhara language and becoming a follower of Orthodox Christianity (Aalen 2006). This shows that Ethiopians have a stronger common identity, an idea of overarching citizenship that transcends ethnic identity. This identity is rooted in the Ethiopia's survival as the only country on the African continent that was not colonized by foreign powers (Aalen 2006). As it has been noted earlier on, a fundamental problem with the historically entrenched Ethiopian identity was emerged from the Amhara dominated elite's point of view. The identities of the peripheral people's of the south, west and east of the country were not included in this national identity.

In the post 1990s, the Ethiopian politics swings between the forces of 'state integration' or pan-Ethiopianism on one hand and 'ethnicization' or ethnic politics' on the other. The ethnic federal system has brought apparent political paradigm shift from overarching common identity to distinct ethnic identity. Unlike other African states, ethnic identity is the normative identity in Ethiopia (Abbink 1997). As part of this, Woldesellasié has mentioned that since 1991, the political context in Ethiopia has changed from the age-old tradition of imagining and symbolizing 'Greater Ethiopia' to the practice of a political structure articulated under the ideology of 'Formal Ethnicism' (cited in Asebe 2007)., under ethnic federal system, as stated by informants, acquiring a separate ethnic identity and an ethnically defined administrative structure is the key to get access to the resources of the federal government.

Thus, identity politics is undermining the idea of an overall Ethiopian citizenship. Moreover, it has been repeatedly stated that the major basis of the ethnic federalism is ethnicity. Nonetheless, the geographic boundaries of the Regional States are not inhabited by homogenous ethnic groups. Consequently, every regional state has non-indigenous minorities, which have survived the influence of the majority for many years. Even the two regional states -Afar and Somali- that seem to have homogenous groups encompassed non-indigenous minorities. The respondents stressed that ethnic federal system lacks adequate legal protection to the internally displaced minority groups and individuals in every state. The minorities living in states other than their state of origin have no right to political representation. The rights to live and work in

any parts of the country are seriously curtailed. The ethno-political boundaries are serving as instruments of inclusion and exclusion with serious implications regarding access to local resources and political representation.

The ethnic federal restructuring has created ethnic political boundaries between the dominant ethnic groups after whom the administrative units are often named and non-indigenous minority groups. In view of this, Mbembe has noted that: *'...the process of matching ethnic and politico-administrative boundaries that ethnic autonomy may entail not only contributes to the transformation of ethnic identity from the realm of the socio-cultural to the political, but also contributes to the crystallization of wider ethnic solidarity'* (Mbembe 2000: 267).

The post 1990s attempt to establish a direct equation between 'territory' and 'ethnicity' has created 'new' minorities who are now unattended in the new federal constitutional dispensation. One can roughly identify at least two categories of new minorities in Ethiopia: a) scattered groups or internally displaced groups due to search for jobs, villagization, (re) settlement programs and others; b) stranded groups, i.e., groups that are caught in between two or more regions when the new mapping of the constituent units of the federation was conducted. To these categories, one can add the new category of religious minorities, or of the minorities of mixed ethnic origin.

Therefore, these new minorities seek a diverse array of rights such as recognition, identity, exercise and enjoyment of linguistic rights, right to representation in government offices, participation in decision-making, self-rule, reassignment in a way they consider to be their 'home region' and so on. However, they are invisible in the political process within ethnic regions. Over emphasis of the constitution on the rights of ethno-nationalist groups has seriously undermined common ethnic identity and pan-Ethiopian citizenship framework.

Theoretically, the politics of territoriality-control of territory - is inherently problematic and conflict-prone (Anderson *et al.* 2002). In Ethiopia, politics of ethnicity has replaced overarching and inclusive Pan Ethiopian identity by distinct ethnic identity. This politics of territoriality is making conflict protracted in Ethiopia due to unique way it orders relations between ethnic groups. It is constraining rather than enlarging the political space for an overall

citizenship. Nowadays, the patterns of relationship between regional majority and settler minorities and individuals experience acute change. As result, the majority vs. minority tensions often run into open confrontations and violence in every regional state. This is particularly evident in Gambella, Harari, Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz regional States where there are large scale internally displaced minorities.

During the previous regimes, internally displaced minorities were migrated to these regional states from northern and the rest parts of Ethiopia in search of jobs, government villagization and (re) settlement programs. Pan-Ethiopia identity conflicts are more frequent and violent in Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz regional states. This is evidential from the instance that more than 13,000 settler minorities displaced due to protracted identity based conflicts in Gambella. The settler minorities are force fully evicted from their lands, their property destroyed and suffered by cruel atrocities (Berhanu 2007). They have no right to political representation in offices of local, sub-national, and national government; participation in decision making, self-rule and the rights to work and live are highly endangered. This was also the major cause for 2004 large scale conflicts and humanitarian crisis in Gambella regional state (Assefa 2007; Dereje 2006). Similarly, thousands of members of different ethnic groups were migrated to Oromia regions, particularly members of Amhara in the past. However, Amhara minorities' were displaced from different parts of Oromia by regional authorities. For instance, 'the Oromia regional government authorized the use of forces to extricate the Amhara minorities out of Wellega area of the regional state' (Asnake 2004:62). As a result, several lives and properties were lost in this violence.

According to the Lovise Aalen (2006:244), 'without the idea of common citizenship, self-determination for ethnic groups is likely turned into claims of secession and finally lead to disintegration of federal states'. In order to prevent parochialism and fragmentation, space must also be given to the development of an overarching and inclusive national citizenship. The political space must be given for people to have a loyalty to the ideas of both an overall citizenship and individual rights for all citizens independent of ethnic identity. This could help to mitigate identity based conflicts due to institutionalization of the politics of ethnicity in

the post 1990s. Corresponds with this theory, pan Ethiopian identity conflict is due to formalization of identity politics that has narrowed political space for common ethnic identity and restricted competition on the basis of ethnic identity. Identity politics promotes group interests and greed on the basis of identity that makes inter-ethnic elites' negotiation and compromise impossible and making conflicts real in Ethiopia.

### CONCLUSIONS

The 'New Wars' thesis contributes to the analysis of contemporary conflicts in Ethiopia on some scale. Rightfully, the 'New Wars' thesis depicts, among others, identity politics, complex ethnic conflicts, increasing competition over resources, political economy and/or elites' entrepreneurship often organized according to ethnic identity as defining features of contemporary conflicts. These tenets of the theory help to see the contemporary conflicts in Ethiopia in a new perspective. As discussed in the study, these tenets remarkably correspond with the patterns of 'new' post federal Ethiopian conflicts context and the altered causes, goals and nature of conflicts. However, the theory has its own limitation to the conflicts set in the Ethiopian context. One of the drawbacks of this theory is its assumption that the contemporary conflicts are somehow distinct from the past.

As reviewed in the study, it is problematic to assert a complete departure of today's formalization of ethnic identity politics under ethnic federal system from 'a nation building projects' aimed to build one nation out of many via assimilation and marginalization during old regimes. Similarly, the roots of contemporary formalized identity politics go back to the politico ideological agenda of *National or ethnic Questions* by Ethiopian Student Movements (ESM) in the 1960s.

The ethno-nationalist forces that finally succeeded in controlling the state power in 1991 after overthrowing the military regime were descendants of the ESM. The main argument here is that the conflicts set in the Ethiopian contexts require historical perspective to understand contemporary conflicts in contrast to assumptions of the 'New War' thesis. The historical trajectories that shaped modern Ethiopia have had an impact on the contemporary formalized identity politics. The ethno-nationalist armed groups by EPLF, TPLF, ONLF and OLF were driven by not only Socialist political

ideology but also rallied around ethnic identities during 'old' conflicts.

Furthermore, the 'New War' theory disregards another few aspects of conflict set of Ethiopian context. The ideological agenda is still present in the ethno-nationalist secession conflicts by the OLF and ONLF. Despite limitations in specific context, it is justifiable to call contemporary conflicts as a 'new' since the formalized identity politics is the underlying cause of post-federal conflicts. While ethnic based federal system has solved some kinds of 'old' identity based conflicts, it has induced the emergence of other kinds of identity based contemporary conflicts.

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### Endnotes

- [1] The Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) was first organized by the students of the then Haileseilasie I University (now Addis Ababa University) in early 1960s and later spread to the colleges and secondary schools in the country as a protest against the exploitative feudal system.
- [2] Since the early 1960s, the legitimacy of the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie I began to be questioned among the military and the educated elite. Earlier to this, a peasant protest in Tigray (the First *Woyane* movement) and Gojjam and the protest by the Bale Oromo/Somali Nationalists reared their head as a form of bottom up resistance but were suppressed. It is important to note *Haileseilasie* I enjoyed the most peaceful season of Ethiopia's history except for the short-lived Italian occupation from 1936-1941. This peace begun to be 'disrupted' by the sign of dissonance expressed first among the army, then among the students, and later among the general public (see Tsegay, 2010).
- [3] *National Questions* refers to the quests by representatives of ethno-national groups and political forces and/ or movements to abolish ethnic domination and oppression, as well as their struggle to promote political right, freedom, equality and respect of identity of the respective ethnic group. It was articulated by ESM and eventually emerged as a political agenda during the 1974 Ethiopian revolution and even since 1960.
- [4] There are three major *thesis* on Ethiopia's historiography, namely *the colonial thesis*, *the*

*national oppression thesis, the nation-building or the national (re)unification thesis* the unleashing of which partly contributed to the affairs of competing nationalisms in contemporary Ethiopia

- [5] TPLF was organized in 1975 by the Tigrean youth who was discontented with the shift of political power to the Amhara and the subsequent ' suppressions' of the group under the Amhara hegemony. As the name implies, the principal aim of TPLF was liberation of Tigray. Toward the end of overthrowing the Military regime, the TPLF transformed itself from unliberation to multi-ethnic liberation by created EPRDF in 1989.
- [6] Stranded ethnic groups include: Yem in SNNPRS and Oromia; the Mezenger in SNNPRS and Gambella; the Argoba in Afar and Amhara; the Guji Oromo in SNNPRS and Oromia; the Agaw in Benishangul Gumuz and Amhara; the Oromos in Benishangul Gumuz and Oromia; the Opo in Gambella and Benishangul Gumuz; the Oromos in Harari State and Oromia; the Afar, the Amhara, and the Oromo in Tigray.

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