

THE ROLE OF THE FEDERAL SYSTEM ON THE STRUCTURE AND OPERATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN ETHIOPIA

Alefe Abeje

Lecturer, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia

Abstract

Federalism in Ethiopia has contributed for the democratization process by giving due consideration to the hitherto marginalized groups and by addressing the country's age-old problem of national question. The adoption of the federal system of government was meant to provide a proper balance between the centre and regions. In principle, the multiparty system strengthens the functioning of federal structures in a democratic society. The division of power at different levels of government can be made more equitable and fair in a country with competitive party system. However, in Ethiopia, contrary to this well-established principle, there is a strong centralised party with overarching control of government at all levels of government. Besides, there is a lack of clear line between party and state. These, together with lack of strong opposition parties, are against the existence of a genuine federal system.

It is encouraging that all the parties recognised the need to maintain the federal system. Most of these parties, however, expressed views against some of the major pillars of the system, such as the ethnic component of the federal system and right of ethnic groups to self-determination up to secession.

Keywords: Federalism, Party politics, multiparty politics, democracy

Theoretical Overview

The link between federalism and political parties

Watts (1998: 127) maintains that "understanding the establishment, operation, and evolution of federal systems requires an examination of more than the formal constitutional and governmental structures. The functioning of the formal and institutional framework is dependent on the underlying political, social and economic structures and the roles played by actors such as political parties. The structure of party systems and the role played by political parties are important determinants of the functioning of federal systems (Riker, 1964: 129; Watts, 2008).

Riker (1964:129) asserts that "The federal relationship is centralised according to the degree to which the parties organised to operate the central government control the parties organised to operate the constituent governments. For Riker, constitutional guarantees for separation of power are ineffectual when leaders of a single party control both the center and the regional parties (Riker, 1964:130). For instance, in the USA, the political parties have a highly decentralized organization; in Canada, the federal government is controlled by polity-wide parties, while the regional governments are controlled by provincial parties without any national base, and elections to the two levels are held on two different dates. Therefore in both countries, these conditions make both federations relatively decentralized (Watts, 2008). Watts (1999: 75) stresses that political parties and the political party structure affect the degree of decentralization within federations. Watts (1999: 91) recognizes four aspects in this

regard: “(1) the organizational relationship between the party organizations at the federal level and provincial or state party organizations, (2) the degree of symmetry or asymmetry between federal and provincial or state party alignments, (3) the impact of party discipline upon the representation of interests within each level, and (4) the prevailing pattern of political careers”. Therefore, measuring the degree of federalism requires measuring the degree of party centralization.

The viability of ethnic party system

There is a significant debate among scholars about the merits of ethnic based political parties. Many scholars have a negative view about mono-ethnic parties (see, for instance, Binda and et al, 2005:15). Critics stressed the strong emotional quality and zero-sum competitive logic associated with ethnic base parties (Hislope, 2005; Hicken, 2008: 74). The typical feature of such parties is an electoral strategy to “...mobilize its ethnic base with exclusive, often polarizing appeals to ethnic group opportunity and threat...electoral mobilization is not intended to attract additional sectors of society to support it... overall contribution to society divisive and even disintegrative.” (Gunther and Diamond, 2001), quoted by Bogaards (2008: 49). By appealing to electorates in ethnic terms, by making ethnic demands on government, ethnic parties may help to deepen and extend ethnic divisions (Horowitz, 1985: 291; Miller, 2006; Binda and et al, 2005:15).

On the other hand, however, others scholars dispute this negative assessment of ethnic parties, and maintain that such parties provide opportunities for interest articulation to groups that might otherwise be excluded from the political system (Randall, 2008: 256). And exclusion often led to ethnic rebellion against the state (Birbir, 2008: 165). Proponents argue that democracy works best when societal cleavages are recognized as basic to political life (Lijphart, 1984). The famous argument of consociationalism is that ethnic parties help diminish conflicts by channelling demands through legal channels, particularly if all significant groups can be represented proportionately in state institutions (Ibid).

Furthermore, in Africa, despite official ban from political life ethnic nationalism has proved a potent political force (Mohammed Salih and Markakis, 1998: 7; Ishiyama and Quinn, 2006). Indeed, one feature of African party system is the change towards the formation of regional, quasi-ethnic and religious parties (Mohamed Salih and Nordlund, 2007:144).

It is safe to argue therefore that rather than banning ethnic parties, multiethnic states should focus on using different approaches to promote inter-ethnic cooperation and coalition building. Indeed, even Binda and et al (2005: 17) reminds us that it is important, particularly in the transition from dictatorial rule, that all groups in society be allowed to mobilize freely. In reality, democratization opens a window of opportunity for the mobilization of old and new grievances, including ethnic ones (Alonso and Ruiz-Rufino, 2007). Some also suggest that ethnic party systems might even improve democratic quality (Birbir, 2007). Mohammed Salih argue that, “One of the main consequences of the denial of ethnicity is that African ethnic groups are thus deprived of the opportunity to secure recognized collective rights that would enable local governance institutions to take a more active role in democratizing state and development” (2001: 29). He further argues, “...without assigning ethnic groups a greater role in Africa’s economic and political transformation, the new initiative on development and democracy are doomed to failure.” (2001:31).

Bogaards (2008: 60) also asserted that even in a country with a history of conflictual ethnic party politics, a ban on ethnic parties is not the best remedy: 1), many countries with such bans ultimately stop enforcing them; 2) secondly, party bans may be effective only in the short term; 3) thirdly, ban of ethnic parties is a negative one and will not by itself result in the desired national integration; 4) fourthly, evidence shows that ethnic party bans have been used selectively against national minorities and opposition forces; and 5) bans on particularistic

parties limit freedom of expression and deny ethnicity a legitimate place in politics. Randall (Randall, 2008: 25) rightly argues that it might rather be more productive to develop some form of federalism. Federalism provides a framework within which ethnic parties coexist with national parties (Ghai, 2001), as is the case in India (Karthori, 1996).

Federalism and the views of political parties in Ethiopia

The EPRDF and the federal system

Riker (1967), cited by McKay (2001) asserted that the key requirement for a balanced federal system is the maintenance of a decentralized party system. Riker measures party centralization according to: (1) whether the party that controls the central government also controls the regional governments, and (2) the strength of party discipline (Ibid). In fact, let alone in territorially based politics, in all societies considerable attention has been focused on where power lies within parties because of the crucial role of parties (Heywood, 2002: 257). Thus, the organization and structure of parties provided vital clues about the distribution of power within society as a whole (Ibid). For Schiavon 83 (2006), meaningful federalism requires not only the existence of federal institutions but also conditions, such as party fragmentation, that enable local institutions to exercise actual power and resist their national counterparts (Schiavon, 2006).

As indicated before, the main objective of the federal system in Ethiopia is to deal with the two interrelated issues: one, to resolve the question of nationalities, and second, to democratize the Ethiopian state and society. The hitherto unitarist and assimilationist policies were considered as the roots of Ethiopia's political crisis. When it comes to implementation of the policy of federalism, however, controversies surfaced. Critics and opposition parties pointed out host of shortfalls. Below, the major obstacles mentioned as "roadblocks" against the realization a genuine federal system will be highlighted. 1) The first problem is centralization of the party system: Based on the discussions I have on theoretical part, it can be argued that regional governments in Ethiopia have less ability to act as "veto players" (Stepan 2004) and constrain central government, as both levels of government are run by the same party. As Elazar (1987: 178) points out, "the existence of a noncentralized party system is perhaps the most important single element in the maintenance of federal noncentralization". In contrast, in Ethiopia EPRDF leaders at the center can use organizational and ideological means to discipline party members at the regional level. Thus, the ability of regional governments to offer effective opposition to the central authorities is low. In fact, so far no regional state has ever challenged the decision of the central government for whatever reasons.

2) Another most frequently cited criticism is the principle of 'Democratic Centralism', the principle to which EPRDF adheres. In theory the principle has both democratic and centralist aspects. The centralist aspect is seen through the subordination of all lower bodies to the decisions taken by higher ones. The democratic aspect of the principle is asserted in the fact that the highest body of the party is its congress to which delegates were elected by lower levels of member parties. Also, individual members have freedom to discuss and debate matters of policy and direction. But once the decision of the party is made by majority vote, all members are expected to uphold that decision. Its purpose is to eliminate factionalism and ensure party discipline. It is a belief in a 'correct' line that, once agreed up on, cannot be contested. This practice is supported by the practice of Gim gima (evaluation), which serves as an institutionalized mechanism to discipline party members (Lovis 2002: 87).

The Ethiopian situation, therefore, qualifies both of Rikers's variables of measurement of federal centralization: the party controls both the center and regions, and there is a rigid party discipline. Based on this, it is safe to argue that there is a mismatch between the democratic pluralist elements of the Constitution and the Leninist political principle of democratic centralism under one party dominant system. The organizational set-up of the

EPRDF does not allow internal pluralism or factionalism to ensure the representation of societal interests as diverse as the social make-up of the country. Factionalism would have guaranteed the competitiveness of the system and compensates for a lack of strong opposition parties. As Spieb (2002: 26) indicated, factionalism and internal pluralism helped the Indian National Congress to “enhance its capacity to channel and co-ordinate conflicts, and guarantee a high degree of elite turnover and informal internal democracy.”

3) Another, perhaps more serious, problem is absence of clear line between state and the party, which is almost inherent in one party dominant systems (Spieb, 2002: 25; Elischer, 2008: 9). Most opposition parties consider this as the most serious challenge for both democratization, consolidation of the federal system, and long-term federal stability. In addition to the problems it creates on the democratization process and devolution of power, this condition imply that party crisis or a change of the government may lead to state collapse (Young and Medhane, 2003: 391).

In summary, therefore, party system centralization, democratic centralism, the blurring of the line between party and state and for whatsoever reasons absence of strong opposition party are obstacles to the institutionalization of the federal system in Ethiopia. In view of this, it is expected that the central government will have much more power than provided by the Constitution, which would make the center more dominant and undemocratic. Hence, the view that federalism is a disguise to conceal the fact that government throughout the country is still in the hands of the central leaders. The strikingly uniformity in policy throughout Ethiopia may attest this claim. A fully fledged democratic federal system would have guaranteed states independence in some policy areas (Stephan, 2003:11).

The opposition and their views about the federal system

It is interesting to note that almost all opposition parties in Ethiopia have included the issues of federalism and ethnic accommodation in their political proramgme. Clearly, this is the impact of the federal system on the progammme of political parties. Those formerly seen as being centrist gradually began to advocate federalism and ethnic accommodation as the most fundamental political questions. Even Diaspora based parties such as EPRP espoused rights of nationalities to self-determination and federalism (EPRP, 2006). Ethnic political parties in Ethiopia have quite similar programmes with that of the EPRDF regarding federalism and self-determination, save that most ethnic based parties reject secession. The ‘Forum’, (the single largest opposition coalition) for example, advocates an ethnic based federalism. It also argues that sovereignty of the Ethiopian state lies on the nationalities of the country. Besides, the ‘Forum’, like the EPRDF, believes that both individual and group rights can and should be protected simultaneously. This similarity is applies to other ethnic-based parties.

On the other hand, the constitutions of multinational parties, although enshrines federalism, the equality of all languages, the equality of all nationalities in the political, economic, and social spheres without discrimination, they, rejected ethnic-basis of the federal system. For instance, UDJ and EDP favours primarily other factors, although language could be taken as one factor, such as historical and cultural ties, geographical size, historical reality, economic rationality, and administrative feasibility or efficiency. These parties give primary emphasis to individual rights. They argue that the question of nationalities can be addressed only with promotion of individual rights, good governance and fair distribution of the national resources.

Whereas the EPRDF argues that the single major question for the crisis of the Ethiopian state was the national question, multinational parties attest that the question of nationalities is only one among the fundamental questions and hence the federal system should be designed to deal with all these problems, not merely the question of nationalities. They lament that the current arrangement has lead not only the creation of artificial regional

states with wide discrepancies in population, geographic size, and development, but also undermined the rights of individuals. In this connection, they accused the ruling party of promoting the diversity existed within the Ethiopian Peoples and ignored all other variables vital for federal stability. They also condemned the ruling party of consciously encouraging ethnicity based organizations, including in the sphere of civil societies.

Another bone of contention is issue of secession as stipulated in Article 39 of the Constitution. Almost all opposition parties do not accept secession. They believe not only that the problems of Ethiopian people do not emanate from living together, but also it is difficult to implement it peacefully. In general, both multinational and ethnic based opposition parties have two common views. First, having considered the current system as an imposition, they want the public to decide on the issue through referendum. Second, they challenge that the policy of federalism is not genuinely implemented as enshrined in the Constitution.

Structure and functioning of political parties

Opposition parties

As explained before, a federal system presents political parties with opportunities. As per the theory, by creating multiple important sites for political organization and competition (Brinzik, 1999), each with constitutionally guaranteed autonomy in at least some policy areas (Riker, 1964), federalism gives parties the opportunity to compete and capture offices in both levels of government.

In Ethiopia, some opposition parties argue that since the political space is much narrower in the regions, they face difficulties in their attempt to hold power at the regional level. Besides, multinational parties claim that federalism is being abused to exclude the opposition, especially those multinational ones, in the sense that there is direct and indirect propaganda against these parties as if they are threats to the federal system and the rights of the nationalities to self-determination. Indeed, during the 2005 elections, some peripheral regional states openly indicated that if the CUD was going to win the election at the federal level, they will secede from the Ethiopian state by invoking Article 39 of the federal constitution. In practice so far ruling party controls all levels of government in the Ethiopia.

Some effects of federalization process on political parties are also observed in the areas of candidate selection and party organization in the case of multinational parties and ethnic based coalitions. In my view, this negligible level of decentralized decision-making process that exists in some of the parties is mainly due to an attempt to internalize federalist considerations into the decision-making than commitment to democracy. The ethnic based federal structure appears to have forced them to depend on local party members for elections at local levels for both attracting voters and because of the language requirement of the electoral law. But this is still under the discretion of party leaders at the national level. Personalism is the typical feature of the leadership style of political parties. Under such circumstances, legislators cannot become more accountable to regional and local interests. Generally, there is no sufficient recognition by parties to deal with multi-level activities. Besides, since there is no separation of national elections from regional elections in Ethiopia, the system failed to foster greater autonomy of regional party organs.

The principal effect of the multinational federation in Ethiopia is on the mobilization of parties. The federal system has created institutional space that has encouraged the formation of ethnic parties, which compete mostly in local and regional elections. Currently, almost 90% of the parties are ethnic-based/ regional parties (NEB, 2011). As we know, many countries ban ethnic parties, and in some countries party regulations even go further to the extent of stipulating incentives for aggregation (Binda and et al, 2005:17; Bogaards, 2008: 54). For instance, distribution requirements can be used during registration, compelling parties to have an organizational presence across the country. In Ethiopia there are no such limitations.

Critics argue that the law favours ethnic party system to the detriment of multiethnic party development. In my view, that is not explicit in the law. The intention even seems to ensure wider representation. A party, although not requested to demonstrate “national presence” by running branches across the country, is required, for registration, to collect a minimum number of signatures from a given numbers of regions. But, the fact that they federal system is based on ethnicity, and that self-determination is given to all nationalities means there is an implicit encouragement for the proliferation of such particularistic parties.

The EPRDF and its internal cohesion

Organizationally, the ruling EPRDF is a “front founded by the union of revolutionary democratic organizations” on the basis of “equality”. Member organizations have no separate ideological life. All EPRDF’s four member organizations are obliged to implement national ‘revolutionary democratic programmes’ in their respective states taking in to account their local conditions and realities. The congress, which comprises equal number of representatives of member organizations, is the highest body of the front. The council, comprising equal number of central committee representatives of member organizations, adopts policies and other relevant issues; and plans activities of the front. The executive committee, which includes nine members from each member organizations, implements the decisions and guidelines of the council. The chairman chairs both the council and the executive committee of the front. As discussed before, the major organizing principle of the Front is ‘Democratic Centralism’.

The EPRDF appears to qualify what Gunther and Diamond considered as a congress party. For Erdman (2007: 23), in most of African countries the ethnic congress party is the most common, as there are many small ethnic groups that cannot constitute a meaningful representation in parliament unless they form a coalition. In Ethiopia too no single ethnic group can form a single majority government unless coalitions with other ethnic groups are formed. However, the ruling party is not institutionalized well and the influence of the founder leaders and party discipline makes the party more of personalistic. This client-patron relationship was evident, for example, during the TPLF split in 2003; those who opposed the group led by the Prime Minister including the regional presidents were thrown out of government (Young and Medhane, 2003).

Given the ethnic diversities in Africa and Africa’s lack of an industrial revolution, the integrative party is the closest to the model of the ‘catchall’ party found in the western world (Ibid). The EPRDF looks more as multiethnic alliance (or to use Horowitz’s (1985) word, coalition of convenience, not coalition of commitment), than a multiethnic integrative bearing in mind the evolution of its member parties. Distinguishing the alliance type from the integrative type when that the party under scrutiny is the ruling party might be difficult, given its capacity to use state resources to buy political support in order to stay in power. Given its ability to do this at any time, therefore, the EPRDF might appear to be internally stable. A better indicator here might be the composition of the cabinet rather than party leadership (Elischer, 2008: 10). There is a tradition of allocation of federal offices among the member parties of the EPRDF. The problem, however, is that some of the members parties are not seen as representatives of their respective ethnic communities, but as puppet. Besides, there is no specific quota for each party; it is the discretion of the Prime Minister.

Conclusion

It is clear that not only ideological orientation but also political necessity that required the establishment of a democratic federal system as a framework for resolving the national question and democratizing state and society. The political history of the country and the condition in the immediate aftermath of the demise of the military regime necessitated

addressing the ethnic diversity, by recognizing ethnicity as a major principle in the restructuring of Ethiopian state. Full recognition of ethnicity's role in the politics and emphasis on rights of self-determination are commendable, owing to the country's unique problems and also due to the fact that the "blocking" ethnicity was sustained at a significant cost (Andreas, 2003). Indeed, unrelenting focus on individualism of the liberal tradition is often criticized in Africa, where group and community rights are deeply embedded in the cultures of the peoples (Mutua, 2008). In Ethiopia, the multiethnic federation creates opportunities for regional voices to be heard and enables ethno-regional issues to have greater political relevance.

Allowing ethnicity a place in politics could be seen as positive step towards empowering the ethnic groups and this might be seen as better step to secure collective rights and enable ethnicity to take a more active role in democratizing state and society. In a country like ours where the introduction of a new multi-party system is after years of one-party rule or dictatorship, ethnic parties may be tolerable. Besides, in the Ethiopian case, ethnic minority groups have mobilized and engaged in conflict prior to democratization. Thus, rather than banning ethnic parties, using strategies such as power sharing and promotion of cross-cultural integration is important to offset the potential demerits of ethnic party systems. What are currently missing are regulations that encourage ethnic parties for coalition building. This led critics to suspect that the EPRDF, as an ethnic-based party coalition, has been encouraging, at least indirectly, the fragmentation of the country's party system. Indeed the government so far fails to the use of different approaches and strategies for the promotion of cross-party integration such as the use of electoral formation rules that require parties to demonstrate a broad organizational base. This can encourage cross-party cooperation by making politicians from different parties reciprocally dependent on transfer votes from their rivals. We can also think of other incentives such as priority or larger share in government funding and others benefits.

It is good that all major political parties in Ethiopia have a consensus on the need that Ethiopia should remain a federal state. This consensus should be expanded to other provisions of the constitution. The prevailing mutual mistrust and lack of tolerance between the ruling party and the opposition continues to raise questions on the prospects of long term stability of the federal system. Political parties on both sides of the spectrum need to show deep commitment in theory and act to the realization of a full-fledged democratic federal polity. True, the success of federalist project depends on the success of development of federal political culture. Elazar stresses (1987: 78) that, "True federal systems manifest their federalism in culture as well as constitutional and structural ways" and "the viability of federal systems is directly related to the degree to which federalism has been internalized culturally within a particular civil society." Moreover, as Watts stresses, federalism requires a democratic culture with "recognition of the supremacy of the constitution over all orders of government." (1999:99). Here, it is also necessary that only those parties which have faith in democracy and the constitution should be allowed to function. A party that expresses its intention to use violent and insurrectionary methods should be avoided.

However, there are serious problems associated with the party system. Not only they are weakly institutionalized and lack democratic internal functioning, but they are highly polarized. Therefore, the absence of consensually unified national elite is the major road-block to democratic deepening and federal stability in Ethiopia. This apparently impedes the achievement of development of culture of dialogue, tolerance, and accommodation.

As argued before, centralized party structure and lack of democracy are major challenges to the institutionalization of the federal system in Ethiopia. As argued before, the success of a federal system necessitates the existence of democratic institutions to deliver the promises and expectations of federalism such as autonomy and popular participation. In fact,

Ethiopia has not yet completed transition, let alone democratic consolidation. Speeding up the democratization process is indispensable and the best guarantee for federal stability.

References:

- Hicken, Allen, 'Political engineering and party regulation in Southeast Asia' Benjamin Reilly and Per Nordlund (eds.), *Political Parties in Conflict Prone Societies: Regulation, Engineering and Democratic Development* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2008): 69-94
- Lijphart, Arend, *Electoral Systems and Party Systems: A study of Twenty-seven Democracies, 1945-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1994).
- Matlosa, Khabele, *Political Parties in Southern Africa: The State of Parties and Their Role in Democratization*, Report prepared for the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) as part of its Global Programme on Research and Dialogue with Political Parties (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2007).
- Mushi, Samuel.S. and Rwekaza S. Mukandera (eds.) *Multiparty Democracy in Transition: Tanzania's 1995 General Elections* (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Election Monitoring Council, 1996).
- Reilly, Benjamin, 'Introduction' in Benjamin Reilly and Per Nordlund (eds.), *Political Parties in Conflict-Prone Societies: Regulation, Engineering and Democratic Development* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2008):3-40
- Randall, Vicky, 'Party regulation in conflict-prone societies: More dangers than opportunities?' In Benjamin Reilly and Per Nordlund (eds.), *Political Parties in Conflict Prone Societies: Regulation, Engineering and Democratic Development* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2008):42-260
- Salih, Mohammed and John Markakis, *Ethnicity and the State in Eastern Africa* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1998).
- Salih, Mohammed, *African Democracies and African Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2001)
- Salih, Mohammed M.A., 'Introduction' in *African Political Parties: Evolution, Institutionalization and Governance* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).
- Smith, Jennifer *Federalism* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004).
- Birnir, Jo'hanna Kristi'n, 'Party regulation in Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America: The effect on minority representation and the propensity for conflict' In Benjamin Reilly and Per Nordlund (eds.), *Political Parties in Conflict-Prone Societies: Regulation, Engineering and Democratic Development* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2008):158-181