Shaping the Ethiopian Federal System: Comparative Lessons Drawn from Indian Experience and Policy Implications for Reform in Ethiopia

Policy Brief

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Executive Summary

Ethiopia's federal system, which is based on the idea of ethnic self-determination, has come under increasing fire since it is linked to violent conflict, secessionist demands, and escalating ethno-political tensions. The ethnic federal system was designed to benefit historically underprivileged ethnic groups, but in reality, it has exacerbated institutional weakness and divisiveness. In contrast, India's linguistic federalism model has placed a strong emphasis on political unity, constitutionalism, and institutional coherence while also embracing cultural variety. This policy brief informs possible reform directions in Ethiopia by using comparative lessons learned from the Indian federal experience. The brief suggests depoliticizing ethnicity in governance, strengthening minority safeguards, reframing the functions of federal institutions, and reexamining the secession clause. It seeks to assist stakeholders in creating an Ethiopian federation that is more robust, democratic, and inclusive.

Introduction

One of the main issues facing multiethnic states is managing their profound language and ethnic diversity. In many of these situations, federalism has been embraced as a way to respect national unity while allowing for this diversity. Though in very different ways, Ethiopia and India, two nations with rich and varied cultures, have both accepted federalism. Established in 1995, Ethiopia's ethnic federalism was intended to give various ethnic groups autonomy and self-rule, along with the constitutional right to secede. In order to preserve national unity, India, on the other hand, implemented a type of linguistic federalism supported by a robust union and legal protections.

Different results have come from these distinct pathways. Despite linguistic and religious diversity, India has maintained its territorial integrity and democratic competition. In contrast, Ethiopia has experienced institutional fragility, identity-based polarization, and ethno-regional conflicts. In order to provide helpful policy ideas for restructuring the Ethiopian federation, this brief examines these distinctions. Ultimately, the goal is not to prescribe a wholesale adoption of another country's model but to illuminate viable pathways for rethinking federalism in Ethiopia in a manner that is contextually grounded and politically feasible.

Approach and Results: Comparative Overview

This brief takes a policy-focused and comparative stance. It makes use of qualitative examination of Ethiopian and Indian federal dynamics, institutional practices, and constitutional texts. Structural, legal, and political aspects of federalism in Ethiopia and India are the

main topics of the study. For comparison, seven crucial areas are identified.

Constitutional Legitimacy

A federation needs to have a supreme written constitution from which both orders of government can derive their constitutionally limited powers. Hence, constitutional design which went through series of political bargaining and discussions (deliberations) is the best alternative for consolidating legitimate, viable and democratic form of government. So, building a robust kind of federal system begins with democratically framed constitutional making process. Contrary to the Indian case, the current constitution in Ethiopia is more of an imposition than being a bargained result. This in turn puts the legitimacy of the constitution questionable.

Constitutional Model vs. other factors

Though India's constitutional model is mostly in favor of the center, other interplaying factors such as consolidation of democracy and party politics particularly after decline of one party rule, emergence of coalition government, economic liberalization, decentralized party system as well as the flexible and dynamic nature of Indian federalism itself played significant role in shaping the political architecture beyond the existence of highly centralized constitutional model in the country. On the contrary, it is also evident from the experiences of Ethiopia that though the country has more decentralized constitutional model compared to India, the political system works, however, more like unitary style than federation due to other factors such as centralized and dominant party system, absence of genuine multi-party politics and authoritarian nature of the center. That is why Semahagne (2014) refers to Ethiopia as the "last post-cold war socialist federation" to show some of its similarities with these examples of federal failure.

Integration of federation (Unity of the federation)

In connection to this, Indian union is constitutionally indestructible and indissoluble following anti-secession model whereas Ethiopia's federation is constitutionally destructible following pro-secession model. What does a pro-secession model imply to plural societies?

Treatment (Protection) of Minorities at Constituent and Center levels

As far as the protection of minorities is concerned, India adopts better constitutional as well as institutional mechanisms for safeguarding and protecting the fundamental rights of minorities residing in different states of the Union. States are under the Union's scrutiny as to whether they implement policies regarding minorities in their jurisdiction or not. However, this kind of controlling mechanism is missed in the case of Ethiopia. The highly politicized ethnicity in regional states undermines the fundamental and universal rights of groups belonging to ethnic, linguistic and cultural minorities living in regional states. It is too difficult to respect at least the basic individual rights properly in a country where ethnicity becomes determinant factor for everything.

Multi-Party System and Electoral System in federation

In this connection, India can be taken as an example where emergence and strengthening of many political parties played significant role in shaping and further enhancing its federalization and decentralized multiparty system. Multi-party politics of India was also tested and it passed the challenge during the time when no party could secure a majority required for establishing a government by showing the possibility of governing the country in alliances and coalitions of parties. India also showed to the world how peaceful transfer of power could be made from one party to the other through its relative peaceful and credible electoral processes when compared to other developing federations like Ethiopia.

While the Indian party politics has tremendously been developing from a dominant party rule to a true multi-party system, on the Ethiopian side it becomes the reverse that no political party other than EPRDF gains an opportunity to come to power so far. Let alone the possibility of

opposition party coming into power, there is no significant number of members of opposition parties in the parliament in Ethiopia due to EPRDF's refusal to widen the political space for opposition groups. The worst scenario in Ethiopia is that the country has never conducted any of genuine election since the inception of ethnic federalism in the country. All the elections at various levels of governance may qualify only the notion of periodic elections but are short of fairness, freeness and competitiveness. In the 5th round of general election held in 2015, EPRDF claimed victory over 100% of parliamentary seats.

Thus, the dynamic and flexible nature of Indian federalism as well as the development of multi-party democracy following the end of hegemonic rule of the Congress in Indian politics shaped the contours of Center-State power relations by which states started playing an active role at the national government through their growing bargaining power.

Bicameralism in federation

To begin with the parliament, both India and Ethiopia have a parliament of two houses. Alike other federations, both states followed bicameralism. However, Ethiopia follows a unicameral legislative approach meaning that only the lower house (HoPR) is the only responsible body to enact laws at federal level. The exclusion of the upper chamber (House of Federation) of Ethiopia from the process of enacting laws at the federal level means that the regional states through their second chamber (since House of Federation is considered as a *de facto* representative of regional states) are not able to participate in the making of laws, legislative initiatives and other forms of debates at the federal level.

Constitutional Interpretation in federation

As far as constitutional interpretation mandate is concerned, the two federations do not follow the same procedure. In India, the guardian and adjudicator of the constitution is the Supreme Court similar to matured federations such as

USA, Canada and Australia. Contrary to this, Ethiopia follows a different approach by empowering the second chamber which is considered as political body as a guardian and final arbitrator of any constitutional disputes in the federation. Ethiopia's approach to give a constitutional interpretation mandate to the second chamber is a deviation from the normal approach that most federations follow. Other federations give this mandate either to a Supreme Court as the case of the US, Canada and India or separately established constitutional court as the case of Germany and some other European federations. Most scholars and political groups have critical doubt on the independence and impartiality of the House of Federation in the making of decisions on various constitutional issues in Ethiopia.

Table-1: Summary of Comparison of Federal Systems of India and Ethiopia

Themes of comparison	Indian federal system	Ethiopian federal system
Constitutional Nature	India has a liberal-democratic constitution towards civic nationalism giving much emphasis to the unity of the state.	Ethiopia has constitutional framework designed predominantly based on Stalin's notion of nationalities having their right to self-determination including secession.
Popular Sovereignty	Individual citizens are the true holders of sovereign power of the state in Indian federal system.	Ethno-linguistic groups are privileged Sovereign power in the Ethiopian federation.
Federal integration	It is anti-secession model (it is indestructible union).	It is a pro-secession model (Article 39 of FDRE Constitution. The federation

		is destructible/It is not a lasting union.
Balance of Unity and Diversity	It tries to strike a balance between Unity and Diversity but shows inclination to the former to some extent. That focuses on unity of the state. It is towards to centripetal force (towards to the center)	It gives over-emphasis on ethnic difference and it is the product of centrifugal forces and endangers the future survival of the federation.
Constitutional Amendment Procedure	It tries to make a balance between flexibility and rigidity in constitutional amendment procedure though it is inclined into the former. Initiation of constitutional amendment does not include states.	It is more rigid in its amendment procedure which reaches to the extent of giving veto power for a single Regional state against the majority. Initiation of constitutional amendment invites one-third of the states as a minimum threshold for initiating any amendment issues in the constitution.
Centripetal vs. Centrifugal forces	It is more of center-biased towards centripetal force.	It is more inclined to centrifugal force giving a color of

		"Confederation-model"
Symmetry vs. Asymmetrical nature of federation	It is asymmetrical in nature. The federation gives special status to some constituent units considering their history, culture and political implications.	It is symmetrical in nature. The federation gives equal status to all constituent units.
Constitutional Interpretation mandate	It gives the mandate to the Supreme Court	It gives the mandate to the Second Chamber (HoF)
Bicameralism	It has a parliament of two houses and the two houses have significant power of enacting laws.	It has a parliament of two houses but follows unicameral legislative approach
Multi-party system and Electoral system	It has transformed itself from a dominant party rule into genuine multiparty democracy. Electoral system is dominated by the FPTP System.	It is still under a dominant party rule system. Electoral system is dominated by the FPTP System.
Protection of Minorities	It institutionalized mechanisms for protecting linguistic and other minorities both at constituent	There is a tendency of indigenous (titular) vs. non-indigenous (non-titular) dichotomous

	and federal levels	politics in regions.

Conclusion

These institutional differences show how, depending on how it strikes a balance between unity and autonomy, federal design can either maintain or destabilize diverse communities. The Ethiopian federation is at a pivotal moment. While ethnic federalism has empowered some groups, it has also generated centrifugal forces, weakened democratic institutions, and endangered national unity. India's experience demonstrates that federalism need not be synonymous with division; it can serve as a tool for inclusion, stability, and democratic consolidation. Ethiopia must adapt these insights to its context by embracing a more balanced federal design—one that upholds diversity without sacrificing unity, and that builds institutions capable of resolving conflict, protecting rights, and fostering development. The brief's objective is to bring some insights and experiences of other multicultural federations like India but not to prescribe the whole model to Ethiopia. The road to reform is complex, but essential for Ethiopia's long-term peace and prosperity.

Implications and Recommendations

Based on the above comparative overview of the two federations, recommendations are forwarded for revisiting and reforming the Ethiopian federal system. Hence, this brief offers the following policy recommendations to policy makers and practitioners in order to strengthen Ethiopia's ability to handle diversity and fix the system's inherent flaws.

Revising unilateral secession clause of the constitution

Federalism and secession may not go hand in hand. Federalism in India is seen as deterrence against secession. It is seen as an alternative unifying force for divided societies by holding the federation intact by recognizing and respecting pluralistic character of its people. But, Ethiopia's decision to make secession as a solution in a multicultural society is a paradox.

Normally, a federation is not arranged to be dissolved rather it is setup to consolidate its unity and integrity. What Ethiopia needs currently is unity rather than fragmentation and disunity. Giving high credit for civic values which can create a strong bondage among plural societies of the country to understand each other and strive for the common good is very important. Hence, a political system that leads the country towards perfect union is fundamental to Ethiopia's survival in the future. Almost all federations in general and India in particular do not take secession as the first choice for resolving conflicts. Thus, Ethiopia needs to revisit the provision giving unilateral and unconditional right to secession to all ethno-linguistic groups.

Upgrading the role of the House of Federation as legislative body

Rajya Sabah, the second chamber of Indian parliament is involved in the making of laws like the lower house i.e. Lok Sabha. The involvement of the second chamber in making laws enables the states to have a say in making policies based on their interest and needs. This is missed in Ethiopia. Thus, Ethiopia needs to take a lesson from India's experience that the second chamber (House of Federation) of Ethiopian parliament should be integral body in the law-making process at central level.

Revisiting constitutional interpretation body in the federation

One of the basic features of federations is the existence of an independent institution that can umpire the federation. India's Supreme Court is mandated as arbitrator and adjudicator of constitutional disputes. However, Ethiopia gives this mandate to the second chamber i.e. House of Federation which is a pure political body. Thus, Ethiopia needs to establish either a separate and independent constitutional court or gives constitutional interpretation mandate to Supreme Court. But the decision needs to be left for public deliberations and discussions.

Revisiting trends of creation of new regional states

The way a new constituent unit is created in Ethiopia is not helpful in addressing the

problems of ethnic groups in a well-organized and scientific way that in turn help in strengthening the social capital/social fabric and cohesiveness of the different ethnic communities who have been long living together by sharing common values and principles of solidarity. The attempt in Ethiopia is almost to create a separate and ethnically homogenous tiny regional state for each ethnic community. There has been a growing perception among ethno-nationalists that federalism for them means creating ethnic homeland for each and every ethno-linguistic group. Hence, Ethiopia needs to learn from India's approach of organization[1] of states which uses alternative and flexible approach by using various grounds like geography, administrative convenience, economic efficiency, historical integration of societies and others rather than making ethnicity as the sole criterion for organizing and creating new regional states.

Establishing institutions for protecting minorities

A federation needs to have various institutions for treating all citizens equally. Accommodation of social diversity should start from the grass root level. In this regard, Ethiopia can draw fundamental lesson from India's strength in its local and regional institutions of democracy, human rights and rule of law which are prerequisites for the success of federalism because without these institutions federalism cannot work properly and smoothly.

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[1] Tillin argued that the reorganization of states in the Indian federal system has not been confined to linguistic demands rather due to its nature of flexibility; the process of the reorganization of states involves other alternative criteria. Similarly, Arora also noted some factors like language, culture, administrative and economic viability, unity, strength and national security, geographic size, historical traditions and constitutional structure and its provisions play significant role in reorganizing states in Indian federalism. See, Arora, G.K., (2017) Statehood Demands in Globalizing India: Retrospect and Prospect. In Jain, S.K.(ed.) Indian Federalism: Emerging Issues, Delhi, Kalpaz Publications. Pp. 175-196.

Ethiopia's ethnic-based federal system lacks institutional mechanisms for the protection of minority groups. There is no as such mechanism by which the federal government can supervise and control whether a certain regional state has protected the interests of minorities or not. Moreover, the constitutions of some regional states are contradictory to the very principle of federalism due to their exclusive nature. These need to be reassessed too.

Revising the party politics and Electoral system

One of the determinant factors that can shape the working of a federal system is the existence and development of healthy party politics as well as inclusive electoral system in a certain federation. Political parties that are able to attain cross regional and national support are important for maintaining the multi-national federal system.

Compared to the Indian case, the party system in Ethiopia is not able to play a pivotal role for the true democratization and further federalization process in the country. In Ethiopia, the mushrooming of political parties does not necessarily imply the growth of democracy rather it is an indication of fragmentation and lack of coordination in the camp of opposition groups. The system in Ethiopia encourages people to organize and establish political parties along ethnic lines. Most of the time, those political parties formed on the basis of ethnicity are not able to convince people of their programs and policies, but what they have been inclined to induce is division, bigotry, fake narration and disinformation which have a potential in creating animosity, mistrust and hatred among the various ethnic groups in the country. The electoral system is dominated by the FPTP that discourages proportionality. Hence, party organization and electoral system needs to be revisited again for consolidating democracy in the state.

Strengthening the Social Cohesion of societies
Multicultural federations have a high probability of being affected by parochial sentiment and communal violence when compared with national federations. But this assertion is not in

the sense that the presence of diversity *per se* is a source of problem or sign of disunity whereas the presence of homogeneity is the sign of unity. Hence, the presence or absence of diversity by itself may not be determining factor for the unity and integration of a certain federal state. What matters a lot is whether there are strong policies working towards integration of federations or not. With this regard, India set up institutions like National Integration Council and National Foundation for Communal Harmony which are designed to work towards enhancing harmony and peaceful coexistence among plural societies of India. One can take this as indication of India's commitment to make the polity perfect union against possible threats of separatism and secession. In Ethiopia, House of Federation which is commonly known as House of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples is mandated to enhance the spirit of brotherhood among different ethno-national and religious groups in the country. But it is a paradox to preach about unity and fraternity of people while the country's constitution encourages secession as well as organization of political parties along ethnic lines. Devising a policy framework supporting and enhancing social capital/social fabric of the people through institutions is very vital.

Acknowledgments

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