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Abbink, G.J.

Citation

Abbink, G. J. (2010). Political culture in Ethiopia: a balance sheet of post-1991 ethnically-based federalism. *Ascl Infosheet*, (8). Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16503>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



Political culture in Ethiopia: A balance sheet of post-1991 ethnically based federalism

The political transition in Ethiopia in 1991 came at a time when there were high hopes among Africans, civil-society organizations, the international community and scholars for processes of democratisation. The process of political change in Ethiopia has been a subject of research at the African Studies Centre (ASC) since the early 1990s as part of a broader project on transformations in politics and society in Africa and how they relate to the global order.

In the past 20 years Africa has seen momentous changes, and various countries have made significant progress in achieving political stability (e.g. Mali, Ghana and Senegal). However, there has been neither a continent-wide democratic breakthrough nor an institutionalisation of democracy and the rule of law, and zones of major conflict and authoritarianism still remain. The Horn of Africa, including Ethiopia, is one of them. Ethiopia has a long tradition of indigenous state formation and a relatively strong state structure. The Mengistu dictatorship (the *Derg*) was militarily defeated in May 1991 by the insurgent Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), an ethno-regional movement from the northern region of Tigray, with the assistance of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, and has been in power ever since as the dominant partner in the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). It announced a process of liberalization, democratisation, proclaimed respect for ethnic and human rights, and socio-economic reforms, but has not yet delivered on its promises. While doubts about the new political model were voiced at the time,¹ many were too optimistic about the Horn of Africa (Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia) to question the long-term policies and nature of the new regime. Today, most observers are reporting a slide towards autocratic rule, with political opponents being suppressed and growing restrictions on the press and social and educational freedoms.

Since the early 1990s there has been a great deal of donor-driven economic growth in Ethio-

pia, with investments in infrastructure, market development and direct foreign investment in, for example, the flower sector, agrarian food export enterprises and mineral exploration. The level of growth in per capita GDP is sufficiently high for most donor countries to ignore the restrictions on political and human rights, on equality before the law, and the repression. Accountable governance, transparency, respect for (property) rights, access to land, and reform of the justice system have lagged behind, and the dramatic level of violence that has weighed on the country since the days of the Mengistu regime is still an ominous subtext in public life.



New infrastructure: The Gohatsion Bridge (2008)
[Source: http://nazret.com/blog/media/gohatsion_bridge.jpg]

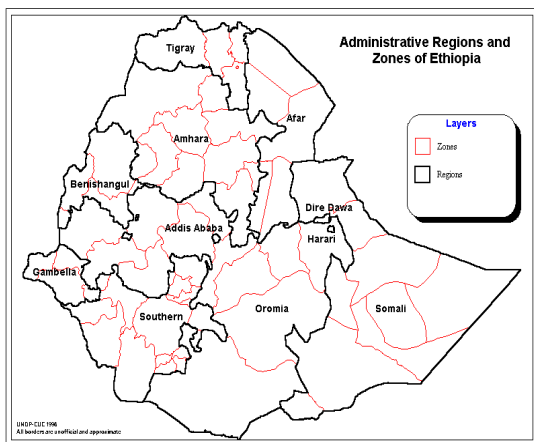
The ASC's research project has considered various aspects of the process of political change in Ethiopia since 1991: legal-constitutional issues, political strategies, governance tactics, conflict and repression, party formation, dominant-party rule, and the effects of ethnic federalism at the local level.

Since 1994 Ethiopia has been a federal democratic republic that politically recognizes ethnic identities. The TPLF saw the nationalities question (and not the issue of class) as the root cause of Ethiopia's political and economic problems in 1991 and took it as the basis of a new federal constitution that was ratified in December 1994. Ethnic identity or 'nationality' was put above civic Ethiopian identity, and sovereignty was not placed in the Ethiopian people but in the various nations, nationalities and peoples. This innovative but obfuscating formula left the federal government in control of a largely non-negotiated political order. The concept of ethnic

¹ See also the documentary *Imperfect Journey* that was produced for the BBC in 1994 by the acclaimed US-Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima.

identity (in the dominant local language of Amharic: *behereseb*) was based on a combination of cultural, territorial and linguistic criteria that were largely inspired by Stalin's Marxist definition of nationalities. While in political terms it drew attention to ethnic rights, the premise of this new politics has had a tense relationship with individual, civic democratic rights. This tension is still present, as is evident from the numerous recent clashes and conflicts in the country.

The political changes in Ethiopia since 1991 have been well studied and it is notable that few, if any, scholars are positive about Ethiopia's unreconstructed ethnic model. The TPLF/EPRDF, under the leadership of the same prime minister since 1991 and who is in effect the real power holder, has clung to a post-Marxist-centrist political model that is uncomfortable with the idea of an opposition, despite legally recognizing the existence of other parties. Elections were held in 1992, 1995, 2000 and 2005 but were, according to election observers, procedurally biased in favour of the ruling party, which is a *de facto* dominant party and does not entertain the idea of sharing power. During election campaigns it has been able to use the state apparatus and the police and the army to convince people to vote the 'right way'.



Map of Ethiopia with the post-1991 ethno regions (*killils*). Source: UNDP
[Source: www.reliefweb.int/mapc/afr_ne/cnt/eth/ethzones.gif]

No negotiated settlement or restructuring of the authoritarian political arena in Ethiopia has yet been successful. Ethnic divisiveness is a tendency that is seemingly built into the system. Ethiopia's politics are complex and highly controversial, with few possibilities for reasoned compromise or issue-directed policies. The country is prone to conflict and has recently



Children supporting an opposition party in Addis Ababa (2005)

[Source: www.willisms.com/archives/2005/05/ethiopian_elect.html]

seen two major regional wars (with Eritrea in 1998-2000 and Somalia from 2006-2008), numerous interventions against alleged domestic opponents and some smaller insurgent forces. A military campaign to suppress the radical Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in the eastern Ogaden (Somali) region after a 2007 assault on personnel at an oil-drilling site is still ongoing in 2010.

Despite increased economic investment and remittances, migrant communities outside Ethiopia are almost universally critical of Ethiopian state politics, sometimes vehemently and unreasonably so, but their criticism is having little impact. However, partnerships between the Ethiopian state and the diaspora have great potential, in the political sense too.

International donor countries continue to infuse Ethiopia with development aid to such an extent that they have created a serious dependency syndrome as well as a vital lifeline for the regime. However the limited influence they are able to wield on domestic politics is remarkable. Democracy and the rule of law are rhetorically stated as important, as criteria to measure performance against and a condition for continued aid, but they are not insisted upon. This perhaps reflects the dilemma of the international community. In addition, Ethiopia can now play the ever-increasing Chinese role (and its financial resources) off against the western powers that were historically the country's partners. China is seen by the Ethiopian leadership as a *political* model with its one central dominant party that co-opts politics, its single ideology, and tactics such as strategically suppressing opposition groups, restricting press freedom, NGO activities and civil society, and trying opponents on al



ONLF fighters (2008)

[Source:

http://farm2.static.flickr.com/1338/1130155380_d342756074_m.jpg]

leged crimes with evidence based on false witness statements.

The huge business interests that the ruling party has amassed in Ethiopia are of vital importance to it. Companies nationalized by the previous regime have been privatised while the TPLF/EPRDF and its supporters have in effect taken over all the key sectors of the economy. Privatisation 'in favour of' the ruling party has led to consistent complaints of unfair competition by businessmen of a different political background. In addition, all land in Ethiopia is still state-owned (already since 1975) and not privately or communally held. This does not make sense economically in times of perpetual food shortages as it leads to land insecurity, a lack of agricultural dynamics and frequent local conflicts, but is being continued for reasons of political control.

When considering its governance ideology, the ruling party appears to have a 'religious' conception of politics, seeing it as ontological and in a class by itself, a way that cannot be entertained in any other form than its own, and one rooted in an ideology called 'revolutionary democracy'. This is opposed to liberal democracy, which is seen by the dominant party leadership as unsuited to a developing country like Ethiopia, although the underlying reason might be to help it to cling to power. Elections are thus unlikely ever to result in defeat for the ruling party. The TPLF/EPRDF sees itself as a vanguard party that is invincible and incapable of

being wrong. This view and the party's policies have led to reinforced autocratic rule and intimidation, a stifling of general freedoms and armed suppression. For example, after the 2005 parliamentary elections, there was a bloodbath, which deeply shocked the nation, when 193 civilians were killed by police and special army units on the streets of Addis Ababa. The government has created an atmosphere of insecurity and fear among the general public who, in turn, have little trust in their leaders. There is insufficient space for independent initiative, dissent and debate. While election campaigns by opposition parties are allowed to be organized, for example in the run-up to parliamentary elections in May 2010, the intimidating presence of the state in the form of politicians, the police, the secret forces and party cadres is thwarting much of their scope for action and freedom.

The recognized opposition parties have a peaceful agenda for political change but their leaders are regularly harassed, threatened, banned, exiled and imprisoned. (For example, Ms Birtukan Mideqsa, the leader of the opposition UDF, was sent to prison for life in 2009.) The Ethiopian people have become used to the suppressive arm of the state and are deeply sceptical of democratic change. The general conclusion of research into the democratic potential of Ethiopian politics since 1991 can therefore only be pessimistic. The country's domestic stability is fragile and wrought with underlying tensions, and regional stability is also elusive.



Ethiopian woman voting in the 2005 elections

[Source: www.willisms.com/archives/2005/05/ethiopian_elect.html]

A core finding of the ASC's research is that these problems directly relate to the problematic basis of the current political system, which could benefit from change instead of further rigidifica-

tion. Less emphasis on ethnic division and more emphasis on coalition building would seem advisable. Despite the absence of past colonial traumas, a strong state heritage and a relatively well-trained and capable bureaucracy, Ethiopia's political record is, unfortunately, not very different from that of the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa. While there is still potential, many of the chances the country has had since 1991 to break with its violent past and build new democratic coalitions have been missed.

Further research into the benefits and limitations of ethnically based federalism in the light of democratic theory, federalism, good-governance ideologies, neo-patrimonialism, ethnicity and conflict studies is needed. Additional information and theoretical reflections on Ethiopia's recent political past can be found in the publications listed below.

Relevant publications

J. Abbink

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J. Abbink & A. Viveen

- 2009 'Democracy Deferred: Understanding elections in Ethiopia. Experiences and policy options', Paper for the International Seminar on Elections in Africa, 25 November, The Hague: Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Contact: Prof. Jan Abbink
African Studies Centre
P.O. Box 9555
2300 RB Leiden
The Netherlands

e-mail: abbink@ascleiden.nl
website: www.ascleiden.nl