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Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. A comparative study of the Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz regions

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10.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined inter-regional conflicts that emerged between the Benishangul-Gumuz and its Amhara and Oromo neighbours. This chapter shifts the discussion to centre-regional relations. As defined in the theoretical chapters, federations are distinct from unitary systems of government because of the constitutional entrenchment of the sub-national units in their decision procedure. In Ethiopia too, the federal constitution promises wide-ranging powers to the regions. Moreover, Ethiopian federalism in Ethiopia has con-federal overtures as the ethnic regions have the theoretical right of secession. If one goes beyond the constitutional rhetoric, a high-degree of asymmetry characterises centre-regional relationships. This calls for the examination of the mechanisms through which the federal and the regional governments interact. Put simply, centre-regional relations in federations transpire both formally and informally (Opeskin 2001).

The federal constitution in Ethiopia has not defined the institutional framework for centre-regional relations (Assefa 2007: 383). Yet, the federal executive and the EPRDF dominate relationships between the two orders of government. Hence, this chapter examines centre-regional relations from three angles. First, a discussion of the way in which the federal government maintains its control over the peripheral regions in general and the study regions in particular will be made. The second involves examining the relationships between the EPRDF and its affiliated regional ruling parties in the study regions. Finally, the chapter considers some aspects of political and economic exchanges that exist between the study regions and the political centre.

10.2 Centre-regional Relations and the Federal Executive

In addition to the asymmetrical relationship that prevails between the centre and the regions in terms of policy-making and finance, the federal executive routinely intervenes in the day-to-day activities of the regions. The way the federal executive manages its relationship with the regions passed through two important stages. First, in the period from 1992-2001, the central government maintained direct control over the regions through advisors deployed to the regions. The establishment of the Office of Regional Affairs (ORA) under the office of the PM after the inauguration of the federal government in 1995 gave an institutional cover for the other wise informal central control over the regions. Second, after restructuring the federal executive in 2001, the federal government established the Ministry of Federal Affairs and enacted legislation with regard to the administration of centre-regional relations.

10.2.1 Direct control through central advisors (1992-2001)

The period (1992-2001) saw two kinds of central actors in the regions. First, right after the establishment of the regions in 1992, the TPLF assigned its senior cadres as advisors for almost all of the regions except Tigray. The advisors were actively involved in decision-making and became primary movers and shakers in the new regions (Aalen 2002: 91; Assefa 2006: 153; Merera 2003: 124). Second, after the inaugural of the federal government in 1995, the now defunct ORA was established as an ad-hoc agency in charge of centre-regional relations. A senior TPLF cadre, Belay Bitew became head of this agency. However, ORA had no clearly outlined mandates. Thus, it had broad political and administrative functions. Its advisors were responsible to provide guidance to the political parties of the new regions. Moreover, it provided technical assistance to those peripheral regions, which had to start autonomy from a scratch (Assefa 2006: 153; Young 1999).

However, when the advisors emerged as the real power brokers, the role of the ORA became controversial (Aalen 2002: 101; Assefa 2006: 153-4). The members of the general public who were aware that local and regional officials were powerless used to submit their petitions directly to officials of the ORA and the officers of the federal army.¹ As

a result, there was nearly unanimous bitterness among regional officials about their experience under ORA. For instance, one official of the B-G region remarked:

The federal advisors, who felt that they were more loyal to the new system than we the regional officials were, tightly controlled our region. As a result, the quality of autonomy that we exercised for several years was less than what the provinces under the unitary system used to practice.²

Bitterness about the activities of ORA was more profound in the Somali region. One former official of the region said:

The contention that the federal government provided support to the regions was false. In the first place, when the team of advisors who were supposed to provide assistance come to our region, their group leader would be stationed at the office of the regional president. Soon after his arrival, he would assume the utmost power in the regional government. No important decision can be made without his approval. Even those advisors who came to provide technical advice in different policy sectors do not work with their professional colleagues. They would rather give instructions to the bureaus.³

In addition to these, some informants in the Somali region argued that unmitigated intervention of the federal government through its advisors was one of the key factors that induced endless internal political infighting within the new political class of the region.⁴ In this connection, federal officials purportedly bypassed regional presidents and gave instructions directly to their subordinates. Such practices reportedly fuel division and infighting within the executive committee of the region and make all the regional officials including the president dependent on the advisors.⁵

The system of direct control over the regions through the agency of federal advisors changed following the split within the leadership of the TPLF in 2000/1. After the TPLF crisis, the executive agencies of the federal government underwent restructuring and the PM declared reform (*tehadso* in Amharic).

10.2.2 Ministry of Federal Affairs and centre-regional relations

The 2001 reform to the administration of centre-regional relations was undertaken mainly because some dissidents of the TPLF used their position within the ORA to enlist the support of the regions they controlled against the PM. Right after his victory over the dissidents, the PM accused the ORA and its key officials of authoritarianism with respect to centre-regional relations (Meles 2001). The criminalisation of ORA was followed by its dissolution. But its functions were taken up by the MoFedA, which was given the task of managing centre-regional relations.

The federal government after the crisis also initiated some institutional changes aimed at reducing the powers of regional presidents. Hence, a decision was made to separate the regional executive from the legislature (Meles 2002: 3-4). Accordingly, establishment of a new office of regional parliamentary speaker followed. Before this change, regional presidents used to serve as both heads of the regional executive and parliament. These reforms were undertaken in a top down manner. This indicated that EPRDF's promises of renewal were not meant to reforming the asymmetrical nature of centre-regional relations. In 2003, the federal government also passed a new law that provided a system for federal intervention in the regions. Critics argue that the proclamation endangers the notion of federalism by providing loopholes for the federal executive to intervene in the regions. Assefa Fishea, for instance, notes the proclamation gives a 'wide legal framework for federal action that seems to go against the tone of the federal system itself' (2007: 351). In contrast, the government justified the bill as instrument of formalising and legalising centre-federal relations. In this respect, PM Meles remarked:

...[the] collaboration between the regional governments and the federal government was happening because of their willingness to cooperate. The cooperation was not happening because of a law, which sanctions their relationship. Even if the cooperation between the regions and the federal government should continue in the future, it is anticipated that the lack of a

legal framework, which sanctions/regulates their relationship, might engender problems (2003: 7).

This and other proclamations strengthened the role of the MoFedA in steering centre-regional relations. This ministry, according to proclamation 256/2001 has two major functions. First, it is generally responsible for all of the regions regarding the operation of the federal police, setting of national standards for urban planning; finding solutions to inter-regional conflicts; coordinating federal intervention in the regions and others .

Second, it is specifically responsible to coordinate the assistance that the federal government provides to the four peripheral regions (Gambella, Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz and Somali) of the country. Initially, when the MoFedA was established, a senior member of the TPLF, Abbay Teshaye appointed as minister. Another key official of the TPLF, Gebreab Bernabas became State-Minister in charge of centre-regional relations.

The general mandate of the MoFedA applicable to all the regions appears to be primarily one of coordination. However, its task towards the four peripheral regions is supervisory. Indeed, when one looks at MoFedA from the study regions, it appears an intrusive ministry of interior with wide powers of intervention in local and regional councils than a ministry in charge of ordinary coordination.

In contrast to the defunct ORA, MoFedA has an expanded scope of activities. It has two major divisions, Regional Affairs and Urban Development. State ministers lead each of these divisions. The Regional Affairs division has three departments that deal with economic and political developments in the peripheral regions. The Department of Pastoral Development is responsible for assisting the Afar and the Somali regions in project planning and implementation on pastoral development. Similarly, the Department of Semi-Agricultural Development works in tandem with the Benishangul-Gumuz and the Gambella regions with the objective of transforming the farming practices of the two regions into permanent agriculture. In contrast, the inaptly called Department of Democratisation is officially responsible for all of the four regions regarding political 'capacity building'. Its actual functions, as discussed below, go over and beyond helping the regions build their administrative capacities.

At the time of its establishment, MoFedA tried to disassociate itself from the discredited ORA. It, for example, repeatedly proclaimed that its support to the regions would follow a democratic approach. Hence, the ex-Minister Abay Teshaye said:

The federal government would not become a patron or a boss to the regions. The support, which we provide, would depend on the needs of the regions. The strategies, policies, or programmes that we adopt will be first discussed with the regions. The regions would have a chance to provide their input. Then they would own and implement the programmes (2002: 6).

In practice, however, MoFedA's showed little change from the domineering traditions of ORA. This is evident from its consideration of the four regions as basket cases of failure requiring doses of federal intervention to help them overcome their problems of rent-seeking behaviour. For instance, MoFedA draft policy on conflict resolution states:

Rent seeking has been widespread in the Somali, Benishangul, and Gambella and Afar regions. In the Somali region, the problem emerged in the form of clanism, cliquishness, promotion of the Greater Somalia outlook, and corruption. There was also a similar rent-seeking attitude in the Afar region. The ruling party in the Afar region was supporting with money, arms and human resources the outlawed Afar rebel movement in the name of defending Afar territories from the "invasion" of the Somali Issa. The situation has, however, improved after the removal of the rent-seeking leadership (MoFedA 2004b: 36-7).

The only major change the formation of the MoFedA brought in the administration of centre-regional relationships was cessation of the practice of sending the so-called advisors from the centre to the regions on a semi-permanent basis. In contrast, officials of MoFedA now regularly shuttle between their headquarters in Addis Ababa and the capital of the respective regions. In spite of all the promises of a new approach, the power and influence of MoFedA over the regions has not declined. Its mandate still surpasses mere provision of advice. For instance, the Department of Democratisation in its annual work plan for the year 2002/03 planned to: 'strengthen the regional councils of the

four regions by creating a party and government structure which is capable of providing strong leadership' and 'revise and endorse the constitutions of the regions' (MoFedA 2002c: 16).

A report issued by MoFedA, some months after the approval of the above work plan read:

A committee, which was established by the MoFedA and other federal offices, studied the conflict occurred between the Gambella People's Democratic Unity Party (GPDUP) and the Gambella People's Liberation Party (GPLP). On the basis of the findings of the study, a renewal programme was carried out for officials of Gambella. This led to the revision of the regional constitution and the formation of a new regional government. Similarly, a study team has been established by officials drawn from the MoFedA and other federal offices to study the dispute that arose between the EBPDO and the BGPDUF in the Benishangul-Gumuz region. Hence, a renewal programme for the region was carried out. Consequently, the nationality organisations under BGPDUF adopted a unified programme. Additionally, the constitution of the region was revised and the structures of the regional government were adjusted. Thus, there are now conducive conditions for stability and development in the region (MoFedA 2003b: 5).

The manner in which MoFedA brought the above changes clearly demonstrates the continuation of a top down approach in the management of centre-regional relations. Similarly, MoFedA followed a highhanded and top-down approach regarding the *woreda* decentralisation programme⁶ in the four peripheral regions. First, the Democratization Department announced:

The implementation of the new vision on good governance in the four regions requires a *woreda* and *kebele* focussed bureaucratic structure. The structure that prevails in the regions so far does not give adequate powers to the lower levels of government. Power has been, therefore, concentrated around the executives of the regions and the *zones*. This has to be changed. In view of this, MoFedA plans in 2003 to establish a *woreda* and *kebele* focussed bureaucratic structure (MoFedA 2002c: 18).

Once it put the *woreda* decentralisation programme on its agenda, MoFedA almost coerced the regions to make the necessary institutional

and legal changes to transfer personnel and financial resources to the *woreda*. The intensity of this pressure on the regions became known when MoFedA threatened the Somali region that showed reluctance to implement the programme with suspension (Meleekte Federal 2004). After the threats, the region undertook the *woreda* decentralisation programme in a haphazard manner.

Because of such highhanded approaches, officials of SNRS and BGNRS do not as such see much difference in the administration of centre-regional relations after the establishment of the MoFedA. One official of the Somali region, for instance, underscored:⁷

Even now, the relationship between our region and the Ministry of Federal Affairs is not a relationship of partnership. The ministry's main function is to control our activities. Its officials do not come here to provide assistance but to monitor and supervise our activities. If there are differences between the ideas of the regional officials and MoFedA, the ideas of the latter would prevail.

In addition to the MoFedA, the army plays a role in centre-regional relations and in the internal administration of some of the regions affected by conflicts. For instance, the army has had a strong presence in the Somali region since the beginning of ONLF's armed insurgency. The military officials seem to intervene directly and indirectly in the workings of the regional government. For example, they participate in vetting the candidates of the EPRDF affiliated SPDP. This happened during the 2005 parliamentary and regional elections. There are also allegations in the Somali region that army officials could cause either the appointment or dismissal of officials at local and regional levels.⁸

10.3 The House of Federation in Centre-regional Relationships

The HoF is a non-legislative second chamber of the Ethiopian parliament. It is composed of representatives of the ethnic groups of the country. In practice, the regions send their delegates to the HoF. Like second chambers of other federations, representation at the HoF is not

proportional. The constitution, however, follows a mixed approach. Hence, it provides one representative for each of the ethnic groups of the country irrespective of their size, while the bigger ethnic groups would have one additional representative for each one million of their populations (Art. 61/2).

The HoF enters federal-regional relations in three major ways – constitutional interpretation, conflict management and deciding the formula for federal subsidy. Of all the functions of the HoF, its task of constitutional interpretation makes the Ethiopian federation distinct from other federations. In almost all other federations, constitutional interpretation rests on either supreme or constitutional courts (Burgess 2006: 158; Watts 1999: 100). As constitutional interpretation is an important element in the development of federations, it has been assigned to an organ independent of the two orders of government and to the extent possible impartial from partisan politics. This is despite the fact that the legitimacy of the unelected judiciary to legislate laws through constitutional interpretation remains controversial (Watts 1999: 100).

In the Ethiopian case, the HoF is a partisan political organ with the power of constitutional interpretation. According to Assefa Fishea, the decision to provide the task of constitutional interpretation to the HoF emanated from two considerations. First, there appeared to be a belief among the framers of the constitution that as the constitution was a political covenant among the sovereign ‘nations, nationalities and peoples’ of the country and its interpretation should be left to its authors. Second, the framers of the constitution feared that giving away the power of constitutional interpretation to the courts might lead to ‘judicial adventurism’ (2007: 402-3). However, the key reasons behind this decision go further than these official justifications. Most importantly, the EPRDF, which introduced federalism in a top-down manner with no constitutional bargaining, sought to control the institution that was put in charge of interpreting the constitution.

After giving the final authority of constitutional interpretation to a political organ, the constitution, however, instituted a quasi-judicial organ called the CCI. It is largely composed of judges and legal professionals and its task is limited to assisting the HoF. It, therefore, gives non-binding legal opinions on petitions that the HoF receives regarding constitutional interpretation.

Table 10.1 Regional representation at the HoF

Region	Representatives at HoF	Percentage of representatives
Tigray	6	5.5
Afar	2	1.85
Amhara	17	15.74
Oromia	16	14.81
Somalia	4	3.70
Benishangul-Gumuz	4	3.70
SNNPR	54	50
Gambella	4	3.70
Harari	1	0.92
Total	108	100.00

Compiled from data from the HoF

So far, the HoF has not faced a question that could influence the development of federalism in Ethiopia. This is because the dominant party controls both the federal and regional governments and the HoF itself. It is, however, difficult to envisage how the present approach to constitutional interpretation would fare in a multi-party context where opposing parties may control the federal and the regional governments. In such a situation, the HoF would at least face two critical problems. First, a single region (the SNNPR) controls about half of its seats (see table 10.1). Second, it would always face difficulties to rise above partisan politics in its task of constitutional interpretation. In other words, it could scarcely earn the trust of the different players within the system.

Next to constitutional interpretation, the HoF emerged as a key federal institution of conflict resolution. It is responsible for administering questions related to ethnic self-determination and secession (art. 62/3); formation of new ethnic regions (art. 47); resolving inter-regional territorial disputes (art. 62/6) and authorising federal intervention (art. 62/9). Two proclamations further elaborated its broad powers. Proclamation 251/2001 provided key procedures that the HoF uses when it deals with questions regarding contested inter-regional boundaries and such self-determination questions as secession, recognition of separate ethnic identity and formation of a new ethnic region out of existing ones. In contrast, the controversial Federal Intervention Bill (proclamation 359/2003) outlined the role the HoF plays when the federal government intervenes in the regions because a

given region cannot prevent deterioration of security, human rights violations, or when any regional government by commission or omission endangers the constitutional order.

Since the HoF started to be engaged in conflict management at the beginning of 2000, it was involved in both of the study regions. It mediated between the Bertha and the Gumuz in 2000. It also decided on the complaint of the non-titular communities of the B-G region regarding the right to be elected (discussed in chapter 7). In contrast, it routinely returns petitions it receives from various Somali clans such as the Sheikash, Dubbe and Rer Barre based on a provision within proclamation 251/2001 that provides 'exhaustion of state [regional] level procedures' (article 20) (Ye Federation Dimits 2005). It, nonetheless, engaged with the Somali region regarding conflicts on two occasions. First, it issued a warning in 2004 to the SNRS threatening federal intervention unless the latter ensures good governance and stops conflicts. Second, in October 2005 it decided for the carrying out a referendum to resolve lingering boundary disputes between the Somali and the Oromia regions (discussed in chapter 8).

The third major role of the HoF in federal-regional relations is its task of deciding the subsidy allocation formula to the regions (discussed in chapter 4).

10.4 Asymmetrical Inter-party Relations

Asymmetry characterised the relationship that emerged between the EPRDF and the ruling parties in the peripheral regions. In the first place, the 'vanguard' parties of the peripheral regions have not so far received membership offers from the EPRDF. This is despite the fact the EPRDF directly or indirectly involved in their formation and ongoing activities. The main reason that led to the exclusion of these parties from the EPRDF appears to be the belief within the latter that non-sedentary, pastoral and agro-pastoral societies of the Ethiopian periphery do not have the capacity to shoulder its ideology of revolutionary democracy (Clapham 2002a: 27). For instance, Dawit Yohannes the former speaker of parliament said:

We are a revolutionary democratic party and apply strict criteria for those organisations that want to become members of our coalition. So far, [political parties in the peripheral regions] have not reached this stage. An example is the Afar and Somali parties, which because of their Muslim dominance have not been able to fulfil the criteria of gender equality (cited in Aalen 2002: 83).

Despite their exclusion, the four regional ruling parties have officially been termed allies of the EPRDF. However, their actual relationship with the latter is characterised by their complete subordination.

In fact, EPRDF's relationship with the political parties of the peripheral regions passed through two stages. First, during the period of the transition (1991-1995), its policy regarding political parties in both the Somali and the B-G regions was less hegemonic. It, therefore, tolerated the emergence of political parties that were not under its direct control. Second, since 1995, the EPRDF engaged in creating affiliate political parties that would serve as the 'vanguard' parties of the peripheral regions on its behalf.

10.4.1 Proliferation of ethnic/clan parties

The emergence of several dozen ethnic political parties characterised the period after the downfall of the Derg in the Ethiopian periphery and the country as a whole. In Benishangul-Gumuz, right after the formation of the region in 1993, each of the ethnic groups established their own political parties. This was in addition to the BPLM, established in 1989 (discussed in chapter 7). On top of these, just a few months before the first regional and national elections in 1995, two additional parties were established. These were the BNWEPDUP, which brought the several ethnic parties of the region together under the leadership of the BPLM and the opposition, the Benishangul Western Ethiopia People's Democratic Organisation (BWEPDO). There were no ideological or policy differences between these political parties other than personalities and the apparent support the BNWEPDUP received from the EPRDF.

Similarly, in the Somali region, the post-Derg period saw a phenomenal growth of clan-based political parties. By the time the

region was established, there were about four Somali political parties. These include the WSLF; ONLF; IGLF; and Horyal. In two years time, more than a dozen political parties formed, based on the names of almost all of the major clans of the region.

Both the Somali and the Benishangul-Gumuz regions saw political instability and internal divisions within the political parties, which formed the regional councils (discussed in chapters 6 and 7). Since 1995, the EPRDF began to intervene directly in the regions in order to restructure the regional political landscape.

10.4.2 Restructuring the party landscape

Since the inaugural of the federal government in 1995, EPRDF's major policy regarding politics in the peripheral regions has been the establishment of subordinate regional vanguard parties, officially affiliated to it. Consequently, it directly and indirectly caused the unification of the different ethnic and clan parties of the Somali and the B-G regions.

The EPRDF's restructuring of the ethnic political parties in both the BGNRS and SNRS more or less followed similar patterns. In the case of the B-G region, the EPRDF wanted to establish a new subordinate party as its relationship with the BPLM faced difficulties (MoFedA 2002b; Young 1999). Because of the rift between the two organisations and internal infighting within the leadership of the latter, the region became politically unstable (chapter 7). In 1995, the EPRDF directly intervened in the region to restructure the political landscape. To give legitimacy to its intervention, it convened what was termed, the 'First Benishangul-Gumuz Peace, Democracy and Development Conference'. This conference, convened by the ORA brought together people from different sections of society. In particular, it brought elders and influential personalities. In addition to the 'representatives' of the titular ethnic groups, the usually excluded settlers also participated in this conference. However, the deliberations of the conference and its decisions were strictly stage-managed.

The former Deputy Prime Minister, Tamrat Layne, opened the conference. In his opening speech, he said:

As the political parties in the region were defective, administration in the region was flawed. The main problem in the region is the problem of political parties. As the parties are not beyond the control of the people, the representatives of the people should discuss about them. If this problem is not resolved, the region would remain dysfunctional. This conference should decide on the fate of the political parties. These political parties should cleanse themselves of the dirt that they carry on. They should clearly state their objectives. They could not just call and mobilise the people the way they liked. The political parties should choose either their “Ethiopian-ness” or “Sudanese-ness” (BGNRS 1996b: 87).

Based on the clear instruction given by the ex-Deputy Prime Minister, the conference decided that ‘all the parties should evaluate and cleanse themselves of “OLF sympathisers”, “supporters of Sudanese interventionists” and “corrupt officials”’ (BGNRS 1996b: 87). Moreover, decision to develop a screening manual for the recruitment of party members; adopt new party programmes and establish a common front for all the political parties in the region was made (Yaregal 1998: 4).

After the end of the conference, the six political parties underwent a gruelling *gimgema* session under the stewardship of EPRDF cadres. In these evaluation sessions, the members of the parties had to undergo a humiliating process of self-criticism. Those who sufficiently criticised themselves and accepted their ‘weakness’ and were thought to have submitted themselves to the objectives of the EPRDF were allowed to become members of the new ethnic parties.⁹ On the other hand, many regional officials accused of having links with ‘anti-peace’ forces, tendencies of ‘narrow-nationalism’ and ‘dictatorship’ were excluded.

Consequently, the political parties were reorganised. First, the BPLM, which had had a pan-regional claim was reduced to the Bertha and was renamed the EBPDO. Second, the two distinct ethnic parties that claimed to represent; the Mao and the Komo were merged to establish the Mao-Komo People’s Democratic Organisation (MKPDO). The Gumuz and Boro-Shinasha ethnic parties remained without much change. The four organisations were then brought together to form a new front modelled after the EPRDF and named the BGPDUF.

After undertaking these restructuring measures, about 250 lead cadres of the new political parties went to the Tatek military camp in the outskirts of Addis Ababa and received instruction about party work and *gimgema* by EPRDF cadres in 1996. Following these changes, the new

political parties officially became allies of the EPRDF. The actual relationships of the EPRDF and its 'allies' go over and beyond equal partnership. Hence, the EPRDF is closely involved in the appointment and removal of officials of the affiliated parties. In this respect, the role of the field cadres of the EPRDF deployed to the region to provide guidance particularly in the period between 1995 and 2001 was important. For instance, when there was division among the members of the BGPUDF about who should take the office of the regional president after the second regional and parliamentary elections in 2000 (discussed in chapter 7) because of the intervention of the EPRDF, the position of Yaregal Aysheshim the longest serving regional president in the country was maintained.

Developments regarding the restructuring of political parties in the Somali region also took a similar trend with the B-G region. In February 1994, the ESDL, which merged close to a dozen clan parties, came in to being with the encouragement of the EPRDF under the leadership of the late Dr. Abdulmajid Hussein, then a cabinet minister. In 1998, under the direct intervention of the EPRDF, the ESDL and the legal ONLF merged to form the SPDP, which like the BGPUDF became an affiliate to the EPRDF (discussed in chapter 6). The cadres of the ERPDF directly managed the merger of the two parties. Before the merger, those who aspired to take leadership positions in the new regional vanguard party underwent a *gimgema* session under the supervision of EPRDF cadres. Many of these individuals were coerced to undertake a self-incriminating confession (self-criticism) implicating themselves in 'clanism, corruption, anti-peace activities' and others. Those who declined to undergo these 'cleansing' exercises were denied membership into the new regional ruling party.¹⁰ The core cadres of the newly formed SPDP like their counterparts of the BGPUDF taken to the Tatek military camp at the outskirts of Addis Ababa and given lessons on party work in 1998 by EPRDF officials.

Political parties in the two regions restructured in this way because of EPRDF's desire of maintaining a one party rule both at national and regional levels. Another point that underpins this practice is the belief that the peripheral regions became unstable because of competing parties. For instance, when the SPDP was established under the close supervision of the ERPDF, the late Dr. Abdulmajid Hussein stated: 'the control of political power by one political party in the Somali region would help avoid the problem security and reduce clanism' (Addis

Zemen 1998). Hence, the EPRDF coerced the parties in the regions to unite. The policy of maintaining a single party in the regions was somehow successful in the Benishangul-Gumuz region where there are no opposition parties to the EPRDF affiliated 'vanguard' front of the region's ethnic parties. As a result, the member organizations of the GPDUF 'win' elections with no competition. The situation in the Somali region is a little bit different. There are opposition parties such as the Western Somali Democratic Party (WSDP), the Dil Wabi and others. However, this does not stop the EPRDF affiliated SPDP from 'winning' elections usually in a landslide. Hence, the Somali opposition parties like their counterparts elsewhere in the country complain that they cannot operate freely. More specifically, they accuse the electoral board, the army and others of unfairly supporting the regional vanguard party. They, for example, withdrew from the August 2005 local and national elections, held in the Somali region (IRIN 2005).

In addition to its direct intervention, the EPRDF uses *gimgema* and 'peace, democracy and development conferences' to consolidate its hegemonic control over its affiliate organisations. *Gimgema* was widely used by the TPLF/EPRDF during the armed struggle as a way of critically evaluating the performance of its leadership and the general membership (Young 1998b: 43-4). In the context of asymmetrical relationships between the EPRDF and its affiliate organisations, it has three purposes. First, *gimgema* is an important way of monitoring the activities of regional officials. In this respect, one top official of the B-G complained that many of the officials of the EPRDF sent to the region used to act as if they were 'professional evaluators.'¹¹

Second, *gimgema* used to keep regional officials always on guard by making them admit mistakes publicly and openly. It is common in *gimgema* for officials to engage in a humiliating self-incrimination exercise of admitting either their 'anti-democracy, anti-peace, corrupt and anti-development' attitudes or practices.¹²

Third, *gimgema* is an important instrument of weeding out officials and ordinary members of affiliate organisations suspected of not following the official line. It, therefore, remains the preferred instrument to remove regional and federal officials who fell out with the EPRDF.

The other instrument in the asymmetrical inter-party relationships between the EPRDF and its affiliates is the convening of 'Peace, Development and Democracy Conferences'. The EPRDF used this institution on numerous occasions to restructure regional governments

and parties. The main features of these conferences include their abruptness; extra-constitutionality in terms of both government and party organisations and carefully choreographed and controlled by the EPRDF. This means whenever such conferences take place, duly constituted regional assemblies and party organs will be sidelined and the conference makes key decisions. For instance, as discussed in this chapter, in 1995 the alleged decision of such a conference resulted in the purging of the government and parties of the B-G region.

10.5 Political and Economic Exchanges

So far, the role of the central elite (EPRDF) in influencing centre-regional relations and political developments in the study regions has been discussed. While the influence of the centre over the regions is still preponderant, it is also possible to consider centre-regional relations in terms of political and economic exchanges. Tobias Hagmann, for instance, proposed the concept of 'neo-patrimonial bargain' to explain the relationship that developed between the federal government and the Somali region (2005: 531). Accordingly, he contends that bargaining and exchange characterise not only relationships between the federal (patron) and the regional (clients), but also the sub-regional actors who in their own right reinvent patron-clientele relationships at local levels (Ibid). Similarly, Paulos Chanie (2007: 357) argued that the gap between the theory and practice of decentralisation in the post-1991 Ethiopia could be explained by clientelistic relationships that emerged between the political centre and the new regional elite.

The following discussion illuminates some aspects of political and economic exchanges between the peripheral regions of Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz and the political centre. The purpose for this illustration is to demonstrate that centre-regional relationships are not unidirectional.

10.5.1 Legitimacy to the 'new' Ethiopia?

The Somali and B-G regions are important testimonies to the failure of the centralisation policy of previous regimes in Ethiopia. Even now, the two regions remain poorly integrated into the political economy of the Ethiopian State. In both regions, there was little investment in social and physical infrastructure. Moreover, few residents of these regions were historically involved in local and regional administrative structures.

The creation of the Somali and B-G regions with self-administrative functions, the emergence of local native elite officially in charge of the regions, better investment in education, health, infrastructure and others are indeed positive outcomes of the federalisation of Ethiopia. Moreover, in accordance with the policy of affirmative action, the federal government provides preferential treatment to the four peripheral regions in terms of budget allocation and enrolment in higher education (MoFedA 2004a: 54).

Because of these changes, despite some misgivings about the gaps between the practice and theory of federalism, many members of the political class interviewed in both the Somali and the BGNRS regions appear to support the ethnic federal arrangement. One key official of the B-G region, for instance, noted that before the introduction of federalism, the youth of this frontier region used to look to the neighbouring Sudan for employment and education. This changed after the formation of the region.¹³

Ethnic federalism appears to have more political and moral legitimacy in the hitherto marginalised periphery. The EPRDF and its supporters use this in order to justify the legitimacy of the theory and practice of ethnic federalism. In this respect, the participation of the youth of the peripheral regions in the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrea border war presented as an important testimony about the successes of the ethnic federal arrangement. In this vein, Andreas Eshete (2003) underscored that ethnic federalism was successful in creating the 'new' Ethiopia for which even the hitherto downtrodden and marginalised peripheral peoples would be ready to pay with their lives. A publication of the EPRDF also underlined:

Because of our struggles and the conditions, which our democratic system created, today all peoples of our country are beneficiaries of the unity that is based on equality. There is also better unity among the peoples of

Ethiopia. The popular and democratic unity, which was the result of EPRDF's struggle, was witnessed in the united response of all the nations and nationalities of the country to defeat the brazen aggression of Eritrea (EPRDF 2000b: 51).

However, the participation of the peripheral regions in the war effort should be understood as an important aspect of political exchange between the centre and the new political class of the regions. For the EPRDF as stated above, the upsurge in Ethiopian patriotism particularly in the periphery was an important testimony that a new kind of Ethiopian patriotism could develop through ethnic empowerment. In contrast, sending young recruits and public contributions to the war effort had different purposes on the part of the officials of the peripheral regions. They used this opportunity to consolidate their power in their own respective regions by cementing the support they receive from their federal patrons, the EPRDF. For instance, Mohammed Drir, ex-president of the SDPD, now federal cabinet minister used the participation of the Somali youth and public contributions to the war effort as important testimonies about the effectiveness of SPDP's political leadership (cited in Kidanu 2000). This was a wrong claim, as the SPDP during the same period (1998-2000) faced international division and failed to provide leadership to the region.

On top of recruitment of soldiers and public donations, officials of the Somali and the B-G regions were transferring millions of Ethiopian Birr from their budget (federal subsidy) to the armed forces as contributions (ENA 1998), even if there were dire needs for funds in both regions. Informants in both regions argue that such decisions were made to demonstrate the loyalty of the regional leadership to the federal authorities.¹⁴ In another peripheral region, Gambella, the Nuer whose local/regional rivals, the Anywaa challenged their citizenship rights used their participation in the war as a way of ensuring their citizenship at the regional level. Indeed, right after the war, federal authorities decided to revise power sharing at the Gambella regional council (Dereje 2006: 225).

Finally, another element of political exchange between the two regions and the political centre relates to the serious challenges that emanated from the Somali region regarding EPRDF's promises of ending ethno-secessionist warfare and bringing greater democracy through ethnic federalism. More specifically, the present situation in the

Somali region shows the failure of federalism to live up to its promises of political autonomy and ending secessionist warfare.

10.5.2 The periphery and the power of the central elite

In addition to political legitimacy, the EPRDF seeks to use the peripheral regions like the Somali and the B-G in order to consolidate its power at the centre at times of crisis. This element of political exchange emerged as an important facet of centre-regional relations during and after the May 2005 elections.

First, during the campaign period, presidents of the peripheral regions, one after the other came on national TV and denounced the opposition parties. With no doubt, electoral strategists of the ruling party carefully orchestrated the almost unanimous denunciation of the opposition parties by the affiliate parties of the peripheral regions.

Second, as some of the opposition parties fielded their candidates in the peripheral regions, the field cadres of the EPRDF and the officials of the MoFedA put their weight behind the candidates of the affiliate political parties. In the Somali region, the list of SPDP's candidates underwent revision several times because of intervention by the MoFedA and the federal army. The final list of SPDP candidates only emerged after the PM gave audience to the disgruntled elders of the Ogaden (Hagmann ND: 12). The compromise, reached in a meeting between the PM and the Ogaden elders, was characterised as a political exchange. The Ogaden elders agreed to enlist the support of their people to the official candidates of the SPDP and campaign against the CUD. In its part, the federal government agreed to return the regional presidency to the Ogaden (Ibid 11).

Similarly, in the B-G region, the field cadres of the EPRDF who were anxious about deployment of CUD candidates were campaigning strongly for the BGPDUF candidates. They put pressure on the non-titular communities to elect the BGPDUF candidates.¹⁵

Third, the EPRDF threatened by the strong showing of the opposition parties during and after the elections abruptly decided to restructure its relationships with the affiliate political parties. At the height of the electoral crisis, in November 2005, the EPRDF and the affiliate organisations signed a Memorandum of Understanding, with the

aim of restructuring their relationships. In addition to the usual promises of mutual partnership, the new memorandum provided for the establishment of a 'cooperation executive body, which will be drawn from the EPRDF and the five partner parties' (WIC 2005:1). Yet, after the ERPDF reined in the threat to its power by undertaking a series of nationwide crackdowns, it indefinitely shelved the promise of restructuring inter-party relationships.

10.5.3 Economic exchange: dual traffic?

The peripheral regions in the past were used, particularly during the imperial period, to provide economic resources not only for the political centre in Addis Ababa, but also for those aspirant officials of the centre deployed in the periphery. For instance, Ras Tafari (later Emperor Haile Selassie) effectively used the resources of his home province of Hararge to consolidate his power at the centre (Barnes 2000). In the present context of Ethiopian political economy, the contribution of the peripheral regions to the economy of the centre appears to be limited. For example, in the Somali region there is virtually no taxation on both the pastoralists and those who cultivate land.¹⁶ Indeed, the place of the periphery has been changed from an object of predatory expedition to regions that receive regular federal subsidy. Based on a formula that considers their level of poverty, both the Somali and B-G regions, since 1993/94, received hundreds of millions of Birr from the coffers of the federal government (see table 4.4). Much of the money spent to cover the costs of the regional government. A modest amount also went for capital investment.

However, the flow of economic resources between the centre and the regions does not seem to be a one-way traffic. This refers to the lack of transparency in the awarding of lucrative construction contracts in the peripheral regions. Many informants, both in the Somali and the B-G regions complain that companies that have closer ties with the central elite 'win' bids for big construction projects. The transfer of the management of infrastructure projects from the peripheral regions to the federal government ostensibly because their lack of administrative capacity reinforces this view.¹⁷ While it is difficult to verify the basis on which companies receive lucrative contracts, it is indeed surprising that

few companies with familiar names received projects to construct roads, bridges, schools and other infrastructure in both study regions.

10.6 Conclusion

[Federalism] emphasizes constitutionalized pluralism and power sharing at the basis of truly democratic government. It sees a democratic polity as one built upon a matrix of constituent institutions that together share power not through a single center but a multi-centered or non-centralized way.... It is also different from kind of club-like parliamentary democracy, where in a center-periphery model, power is concentrated in the elite club or clubs and everyone else is in the periphery (Elazar 1996: 2).

The above statements by Elazar help explain the emergence of asymmetrical centre-regional relationships in federal Ethiopia. This is despite the federal constitution promises not only symmetrical self-determination rights for all the ethnic groups of the country but also unconditional right of secession. In other words, the promise to restructure centre-periphery relationships was not put into practice. Appreciating this problem requires careful attention to the roles of the federal executive and the dominant party in the evolving centre-regional relationships.

It is convenient to examine the dominance of the federal executive from two angles. First, the constitutional division of power between the two orders of government skews in favour of the federal government. Hence, it is responsible for making and implementation of overall economic, social and development policies. Second, because of their dismal conditions in terms of qualified personnel, the peripheral regions became more dependent on the federal government. The latter's approach to the problem of administrative capacity was more oriented towards control than enablement. As a result, the institutions, officially in charge of administering centre-regional relations tended to create bottlenecks for the exercise of regional autonomy by intervening in routine administrative activities. In spite of the presence of the new titular leadership in the administrative apparatus of the study regions, the regions do not exercise autonomy beyond that of language and culture.

The other equally important problem that contributed to the emergence of asymmetrical power relationships between the centre and the regions has been the emergence of the EPRDF as a dominant party at the national level. Like other dominant parties (one-party systems), the EPRDF does not 'permit its monopolistic hold on power to be in any real sense decentralized, divided, distributed, or diluted' (Duchacek 1979: 330). It, therefore, seeks to control the political party landscape in the peripheral regions. Hence, it created all of the political parties now running the peripheral regions. Like their counterpart at the national level, the EPRDF, the affiliated parties of the Somali and the B-G regions are favoured to 'win' elections.

In spite of the continued preponderance of the centre over the peripheral regions, there have been political and economic exchanges between the two. Interestingly, if one considers the history of the peripheral regions and the political centre, ethnic federalism with all its shortcomings appears to have greater legitimacy than previous administrative systems. In spite of this, the most serious challenges to the constitutional rhetoric of ethnic federalism came from one of the peripheral regions, the Somali region. The region remains a scene of violent conflict between the government and ONLF rebels. This demonstrates the glaring difficulties of the present system to emerge as a sustainable instrument of democratising centre-regional relations and ending violent ethnic conflicts.

Having thus far considered three dimensions of federalism in Ethiopia – intra and inter-regional conflicts and centre-regional relations, the final chapter of this thesis seeks to synthesise the theoretical arguments and the empirical materials. It also aims at locating the Ethiopian federal experiment in the broader theoretical debates and identifying some of the major points, which require further rethinking and reform so that federalism emerges as a credible institution balancing unity and diversity.

Notes

¹ Personal Interview: Former *woreda* administrator and founding member of the ESDL, Jijiga, 7 and 25 January 2005.

² Personal Interview: High official of B-G regional state, Assosa, 12 April 2005.

³ Personal Interview: Former official in the Somali region, Jijiga, 17 December 2004.

⁴ Focus Group Discussion: Jijiga elders, Jijiga, 7 January 2005.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The '*Woreda* Decentralization Programme' refers to the centrally driven policy, which was undertaken in Ethiopia since 2002. It was mainly about the decentralisation of powers from the regional governments to the *woreda*. In accordance with this programme, among other things the *woreda* were allowed to devise their own plans and budgets on such governmental services as agriculture, health (health posts and clinics) and elementary and secondary schools. The regions were also obliged to transfer not less than half of their total revenue to the *woreda* through a formula (*Woreda* Block Grant Formula).

⁷ Personal Interview: SNRS official, Jijiga, 17 December 2004.

⁸ Personal Interview: Somali regional official, Addis Ababa, 9 November 2004.

⁹ Personal Interview: Former official of the BGPUDEF, Assosa, 15 April 2005.

¹⁰ Personal Interview: Former *woreda* administrator and founding member of the ESDL, 7 and 25 January 2005.

¹¹ Personal Interview: High official of the B-G region, Assosa, 24 April 2005.

¹² Personal Interview: BGNRS state official, Assosa, 12 April 2005.

¹³ Personal Interview: High official of the B-G region, Assosa, 24 April 2005.

¹⁴ Personal Interview: Former official of the Somali region, Jijiga, 7 and 25 January 2005; Personal Interview: Official in the BGNRS administrative council, Assosa, 21 April 2005.

¹⁵ Personal Interview: Resident of Amba 4 Assosa, 14 April 2005.

¹⁶ Personal Interview: Expert, Planning and economic development, the Somali region, 22 December 2004.

¹⁷ For instance, it was reported that the MoFedA was given the responsibility of managing 34 roads, educational institution building and other projects in the Gambella, Afar and Somali regions (MoFedA 1994)