

Federalism and the Role of Political Parties: A Reflection on the Ethiopian Experience

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Abstract

This study was intended to systematically analyze and evaluate the role of political parties in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Methodologically, this study employed a descriptive design and qualitative research approach and analysis. Both primary and secondary sources of data were used in this study. Key informant interview, and document analysis were the main methods employed for data collection. This study presents political parties as central agents of change in an institutional context of a federal political system. It argues that democratic federalism cannot function without political parties. This study further stresses that democratic federal system requires a system of governance which permits for a free and peaceful participation of contending political parties in a multi-party setting.

1. Introduction

It is broadly held that political parties are necessary part of federal political systems. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution has provided representative federal system with parliamentary democratic government. Yet, Ethiopia remains a one party dominant system for about two decades of its post federal arrangement. Evidence indicates that Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front's (EPRDF) success is largely due to disorganization and fragmentation of opposition political parties. Recently, the ruling party EPRDF has expressed its commitment to multi-party system and emphasized the need for dealing with opposition political parties, in order to promote dialogue and constructive agreement, which signals the expansion of political space for opposition political parties within the federal system. The broad questions that this study wrestled with are: why are political parties important? What roles do political parties play in building federal system? What constraints do political parties face?

This study relied on key informant interview, review of literature, political parties programs, and websites for data collection, and used descriptive method of data analysis. The study has tried to examine the role of political parties in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. It has also tried to

look at some of the major obstacles to constructive political competition facing the Ethiopia federal system.

2. Definition, Functions and Classification of Political Parties

As Solomon (2014:418) argues, there is no single definition regarding what constitutes the term political party. A political party is defined as an organized association of individuals, which endeavors to place its members in governmental offices for the purpose of bringing about the implementation of favored political policies or programmes (Marume, Ndudzo, and Chikasha 2016). Political parties are also considered as political organizations through which people channel commonly shared values, beliefs, and ideas of governing and ordering priorities.

In general, political parties can be considered as an organized association of people working together to compete for political office and to promote agreed upon policies.

Parties play several functions in a society (Solomon, 2014). Political parties exist to perform certain basic functions, which include the organization of public opinion, the communication of people's demands to the center of governmental power, an articulation of the concept and meaning of the broader community to its followers and involvement in political recruitment (Oyediran 1999:142).

Parties are engaged in the recruitment of political personnel; they participate in elections and seek governmental power, and they mobilize voters, refer to communities and identities, defend or contest policies voters (Gunther and Diamond 2003: 173; Budge & Keman 1993; Makinda 1996; Salih 2003).

Political parties are said to be vital to modern democracy (Stokes 1999; Lipset 2000; Lai and Melkonian-Hoover 2005; Robbins and Hunter 2011:12). In other words, it is argued that political parties preeminent institutions of democratic governance. Political parties can play a central role in deepening and foster democracies. They are potential agents of national integration and political stability. Political parties help ensure the survival and consolidation of the democratic regime, provide the electorate with meaningful choice (Vicky Randall, 2007). In brief, there is a near consensus that political parties are essential to democracy. Political parties are indispensable to any democratic system. Party system is inevitable for the

existence of a democratic system. Political parties are the social factors that enlighten, represent and protect the people in a representative democracy (Satri Veera Kesalu, 2013).

According to Gunther and Diamond (2003), three criteria differentiate parties across nations: (1) the nature of the party's organization; i.e. whether it is thick or thin, or elite-based or mass-based, etc.) (2) The programmatic orientation of the party (ideological, particularistic-clientele-oriented, etc.), and (3) tolerant and pluralistic (or democratic) versus proto-hegemonic (or anti-system).

According to the number of political parties that exist in a nation, the party system can be divided into single party system, bi-party system or multi-party system. Based on the areas of activity, objectives and interests, the political parties can be divided into National Party and Regional Party (Satri Veera Kesalu, 2013).

3. Political Parties and Federalism

Political parties are basic to the functioning of federalism. K. Wheare (1965), for instance, emphasized the significance of parties and the structure and organization of party systems in federalism. According to Riker, the proximate cause of variations in the degree of centralization (or peripheralization) in the constitutional structure of a federalism is the variation in degree of party centralization (Wheare, 1965; Burgess, 2009). Similarly, Elazar has also acknowledged that the existence of a 'non-centralized party system is perhaps the most important single element in the maintenance of federal non-centralization' (Elazar, 1987; Burgess, 2009).

The general argument is that federalism offers many possibilities for political parties to play their role in a federation; power is not centralized and can therefore be shared. The federal opposition parties have opportunities for regional access to power. There are more access points and thus more possibilities for opposing the central government. In addition, it is believed that the diffusion of power is conducive for the legitimacy of the system, since minority groups have less chance of being totally excluded (Lijphart, 1984; 1999; Chandler, 1987; Hodge, 1987; Gabriel, 1989). Federalism provides multiple arenas of semi-autonomous decision-making in which leaders are given special opportunities, not available in unitary states, to

respond to regionally distinct electorates (M. Chandler and A. chandler, 1987:88).

Indeed, although federalism is praised for its ability to manage deep social divisions and promote efficient policy in democratic systems, it has been also criticized for its impact on party system nationalization. (Francisco Cantú and Scott Desposato 2012: 3).

Although it is true that federal structures are but one of several sets of factors influencing the tendency towards bipolar or multiparty competition, the general argument is that federalism, where based on territorial pluralism (i.e., a federal society), will encourage distinctive regional majorities/coalitions within regional units (M. Chandler and A. chandler, 1987, 89). Accordingly, federalism may “stimulate contradictory pressures on parties that will tend to undermine internal party cohesion and obstruct the establishment of coherent national organizations” (Ibid). Federalism therefore also encourages very loose, non-programmatic catch-all formations that can accommodate divergent regional interests” (Ibid).

It is also argued that that federalism provides special opportunities for political oppositions (M. Chandler and A. chandler, 1987.90). It provides opposition forces with an incentive for using regional arenas as a means for challenging the legitimacy of an existing federal majority party or coalition (Ibid).

It is also assumed that federal systems are frequently established because of serious integrative problems in the respective societies. Where the various cleavages exist along regional lines, federalism may serve as a mechanism of integrating the regions into an overall political community (Ibid). Hence, it is claimed that the most important effect of federalism on the working of party democracy relates to the integrative function of political parties. The federal distribution of political power provides the national minority party with opportunities to share in governing the country (Ibid).

In short, federalism can foster constructive political opposition because it creates legally independent spheres of competition that operates simultaneously. The crucial theoretical point is that federalism creates a possible compromise that is impossible in a unitary regime. Federalism, by definition, creates separate legal spheres of governance. This creates the

possibility that opposition leaders can develop their own independent policies.

4. The Role of Political Parties in Ethiopian Federalism

Currently, there are around 80 registered political Parties (PPs) in Ethiopia, of which about 80% are regional while the remaining 20% are country-wide. Accordingly, an absolute majority of political parties are ethnic based political parties. Indeed, only few political parties have been relatively vibrant at national level. Put simply, then, the Ethiopian federal system is characterized by leading features, namely, regionally based parties and the inter-Ethnic executive hegemony of a single national coalition of four parties. Political parties and the party system in Ethiopia have been greatly influenced by ethnic and cultural diversity.

The political parties have swapped sides on the issues of federalism. There is no consensus on the shape of the state. Opposition political parties have a different political view regarding the shape of Ethiopian federalism. For instance, some political parties support the federal system, in which the identities and traditions of ethnic groups are recognized, while others oppose particularism in any form. Some other parties have shifted back and forth between centralism and regionalism.

The EPRDF, which has been in power since the politics of multiparty was introduced in 1991, is a coalition of four ethnic-based regional organizations. Thus, despite Ethiopia being formally a federal republic, a dominant -party rule has created centralized system, with power and resources flowing down from the national executive. Indeed, the whole structure and apparatus of federal government bureaucracy in Ethiopia is oriented towards strong central government. Indeed, federal dynamics were dictated by the center. As a consequence, politics at the regional level is often considered as an appendix of the center, and has not yet gained relevance for the Ethiopian federalism.

As indicated above, The EPRDF has controlled the political landscape for several years. Three main factors may have contributed to sustained dominance of EPRDF, namely, opposition parties only appeal to a small segment in society, multiple opposition parties do not coordinate among

themselves and the dominant party system has a resource advantage over the opposition parties.

Indeed one can identify other reasons why the EPRDF is a legitimately dominant party. One, organization and support for the EPRDF is the most evenly spread, nationally and geographically, of all parties in the country. Second, the first past the post electoral system is also a factor that not only strengthens the EPRDF, but also weakens the Parliament as an institution of democratic politics.

The fact that EPRDF controls almost all of the constituent regions of the Ethiopian federal system through its member organizations is beyond controversy. Kasahun attempts to identify the predicaments of Ethiopian opposition parties that are partly caused by the taking shape and consolidation of EPRDF as a dominant actor in Ethiopian politics (Kasahun, 2009). As Kasahun argues, the EPRDF, which firmly controls not only all branches of government at the federal level, but dominates all the constituent regions including local and grassroots administrative units of the Ethiopian federation since 1991. This is advanced through the strong presence of its regional parties, which control the four major regions and political organizations that are closely allied to it in the remaining regions of the federation (Kasahun, 2009).

It is argued that EPRDF's centralized party structure contradicts the spirits of the federal system (Aalen, 2002). According to Kasahun (2009:12) "in spite of the fact that EPRDF could be credited for facilitating efforts towards the proliferation of political parties in a manner unprecedented hitherto it has also significantly contributed to their impotence".

This is mainly because of the failure of the system to provide a level playing field for all contestants. The system discourages the emergence of reasonable opposition and the presentation of alternatives. This problem is, according to some commentators, made worse by the government's abuse of its executive power (Aalen, 2002; Kasahun, 2009; Merera, 2007).

Consequently, many argue that the political environment has been hostile to the existence of opposition political parties. Opposition political parties are often regarded as enemies of the federal compact and therefore the system has never been made conducive to the growth of opposition political parties.

In addition, the party's interest in maintaining its political hegemony arguably inhibited the kinds of reforms needed to reduce corruption and increase state efficiency.

Some scholars raised a number of factors which may have contributed to the weakness of opposition parties. Some of these factors are endogenous to the party's organization, profile and strategy; others are exogenous to it. Many commentators complain that lack an ideological clarity and focus (Fisseha, 2013; Kasahun, 2009; Solomon, 2014). Another area where the Ethiopia oppositions are often criticized is their failure to co-operate with each other.

The other main concern with the political opposition is that they lack strong administrative and communicative structures and the capacity to compete. The other notable features of a range of parties are weakly institutionalized tend to lack deep social roots.

In addition, the failure to express clear and consistent policies and unqualified condemnation of the government are also other weaknesses of opposition parties. The oppositions are nearly uniform in the characterization of the EPRDF faults. According to Merera, EPRDF leaders appear to have never envisioned a role for opposition parties (Merera, 2007). According to Merera, the EPRDF has never considered opposition parties as partners in the building of the federal system (Ibid). Indeed, the EPRDF often also succumb to the temptation to decry all opposition as anti-democratic sympathizers of former political order, chauvinists and narrow nationalists (Merera, 2007; Kasahun, 2009; Solomon, 2014).

The other big concern of the opposition parties is that the electoral system itself is already biased against them. Currently, changes to the election law constitute a more pressing concern. Many assume that electoral changes are likely to benefit the competing parties. In fact, it can be assumed that opposition parties may stand a better chance of success in states or regions which organize elections by a form of proportional representation (PR). Consequently, it is commonly held among the opposition that PR is more likely to speed up their prospect of representation in parliament. The other concern of the opposition is that the EPRDF is using its current power to centralize political authority and increase the prospect of its own re-election by abusing government resources.

Indeed, it may be noted that opposition parties have remained fragmented and weak and, thus have a very slim chance of becoming an alternative government at the national level. Some are *electoralism* parties which vanish after each election, as they are organizationally fragile. Many of such candidates are usually neither politically strong nor electorally appealing, making it difficult for the opposition to form any formidable opposition in the federal system.

Success, in coalition talks among the opposition parties, has been minimal and remained largely unsuccessful. Alliances and coalitions are made, broken and changed at whim. Frequent party splits, mergers and counter split increased the number of parties that now contest elections. This has weekend opposition parties' ability to present a unified front to voters, to consolidate the party system – and, ultimately, to advance a cohesive national agenda.

In addition, the inability of the opposition parties to reach formidable alliances and coalitions has only translated to more political capital for the dominant EPRDF.

In addition, the extent to which the federal system has maintained a 'level playing field' for democratic competition in the country remains debatable. The level of democratic competition and accommodation is still challenged by scholars and opposition actors as not inclusive. Opposition parties argue that resource disparities, unequal access to the media and unequal access to the legal system are the main ways by which EPRDF skewed the nature and dynamics of the political playing field in the federation. There are also allegations by the opposition parties that EPRDF uses state security institutions to whittle down the influence of the opposition parties for effective dominance. Consequently, the notion of democratic pluralism as a feature of multiparty politics is flawed by the growing centralization of dominant party politics. Accordingly, the multiparty political system, envisaged by the constitution of FDRE, is only entirely true in principle and much less so in practice.

As indicated above, political parties in Ethiopia do not share a broad based consensus or agreement on many of political values. Regarding the nature of the federal system, the range of belief is greater, and disagreement runs

deeper among political parties. Some even advocate that the constitution should be discarded.

As hinted above effective and well-functioning political parties can serve as a safety valve by which social tensions and frustrations can be channeled through peaceful means. The importance of effective and internally democratic political parties for Ethiopian federation cannot therefore be overstated. In this regard, it can be emphasized that political parties can provide avenues for social cohesion, and minimize possibilities of open conflict and facilitate peaceful resolution of conflict in multinational federations such as Ethiopia.

Political parties can serve as a unifying force in the face of deep rooted ethnic cleavages in the Ethiopian federation. Preserving and enhancing the role of the opposition political parties becomes critical to the democratic legitimacy of the whole federal system in Ethiopia.

A pluralistic democratic system is a prerequisite for a stable federal system. Political parties are key elements of a federal system. A democratic federal system helps maintain an equal possibility for any political party to win an election by lessening the risk of one political party gaining a monopoly of power. In this regard, it can be argued that Ethiopian federalism can play a significant role by fostering political competition if certain political circumstances are met.

Conclusion

It can be said that legitimate political competition is necessary for Ethiopian federal system. It can be suggested that the current political reforms underway present opposition parties with real opportunity to provide and compete for power policy choices for voters. Opposition parties should take the advantage of these opportunities.

The existence of centralized ruling party and lack of strong opposition affected the functioning of Ethiopia's federal system. Therefore, it can be argued that ruling party centralization and absence of effective opposition are the main challenges for building a genuine federal system in Ethiopia. The prevailing mistrust and lack of tolerance among political parties are also factors that may impede prospects of the stability of the federal system. Indeed, the EPRDF has dominated Ethiopian politics since 1991. While on

one hand the inherently positive elements of one-party dominance include national unity, integration and stability, on the other, the intrinsic negative impacts of one-party dominance include the centralization of power and a weak and fragmented opposition.

Since one-party dominant party system hardly has powers alternated the capacity of one-party dominance to enhance institutional representation and accountability is rare or slowed down. In a system where at least one party exists, political competition depends on the existence of a viable opposition party. Thus, the dominant party system of the Ethiopian federalism is generally indicative of a lack of meaningful political competition.

Consequently, a more multiparty political environment would probably improve political life insofar as party competition generally forces issues to be articulated more fully and brings more scrutiny to public officials. A competitive party system gives groups who feel left out of the current configuration a way to compete for power, whether or not they win. It can therefore be argued that, a more competitive party system in Ethiopian federation would bring in more discussion of issues and policies, and probably lead to less corruption both at the center and the regional as well as at the local levels.

The paradox of the majority of Ethiopian opposition parties is that most of them are poorly organized and lack institutional capacity and clear ideological foundations. Similarly, the ruling party's treatment of the opposition has encouraged political extremism and has polarized the political process. Indeed the opposition political parties have not also helped their own situation. The inclination of some to engage in outrageous accusations has undermined their ability to offer credible policy alternative. A functioning and effective political opposition is essential to federal democracy.

It is clear that the political opposition have a range of problems. Ethiopia's federal system presents opposition parties with real opportunities to develop alternative policy and compete for power.

EPRDF has not made a major contribution to processes of the federal system in terms of either strengthening political parties or enabling them to play a more constructive role. Both sides often prefer inflammatory language to

reasoned dialogue and compromise in the federation. This failure to oppose arguably constitutes the greatest threat to the federal system.

The ongoing reforms underway by the ruling party electoral are critical for the advancement of opposition parties in the federation. However, it still remains to be seen how this political change is translated into a more robust dialogue between political parties.

This study suggests that accommodating political groups of political importance within the federation provides a crucial political space for political negotiation and bargaining. The strengthening of competing political parties in a federation helps to promote political pluralism and the prevalence of democratic federal system. In order to promote a multicultural federal system, the opposition political parties have to be the voice of broad sectors of the society. In addition, intra-party democracy is necessary to increase the influence and contribution of political parties in the federation.

In brief, the recent EPRDF determination to work with opposition political parties by creating national consensus to promote inclusive federal politics seems to be a right decision. EPRDF should try to remove impediments to political competition facing opposition parties. There should be genuine need for consensus, compromise, and unity in order to promote strong federal system in Ethiopia.

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