

FEDERALISIM: A Symbol of Unity

Dawit Atnafu (AAU)

Those of us, who happen to be in Ethiopia, particularly in the years between 1980s and the beginning of 1990s, would still vividly remember how Ethiopians were really in a state of deep hopelessness.

In those years it was even unimaginable for the majority of Ethiopians and the international community to anticipating a united, peaceful and prosperous Ethiopia, as the situation was so frightening because of the persistent armed conflicts and political struggles for freedom and independent throughout the country by nations, nationalities and people of the country who had tired of the enormous neglect and oppression of their rulers.

To many of us who may remember the first national conference that resulted in the establishment the transitional government of Ethiopia in 1991, most of the participants of the conference were represented by their respective nations and nationalities.

There were even names of nations and nationalities which we have never heard before. This was the other major reality evidenced at the time that put the country's future fate on critical position.

Though very young student, me as the rest of Ethiopian and real friends of Ethiopian, had also experienced the fear and engulfed with worry thinking of the situation.

If any of us try to examine the different international media reports as well as the press releases made by the international community at that critical moment, it would be very simple to visualize how dangerous the situation had been.

However, following the demise the military regime, the country was saved from the widely dread of collapse for the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) took a very huge responsibility and established a constitutional federal system through consultation with the various political groups and the general public.

It's been more that two decades now since Ethiopians established a new form of political system by which all nations and nationalities of the country have been able to enjoy their political, economic and other fundamental rights. The basic principles of the 1995 constitution were to establish federal governance based on unity and diversity, and to achieve stability in the entire country.

The constitution has entirely abolished the inequality among nations and nationalities of Ethiopia which was the major reason for the agony Ethiopians had experienced for centuries.

Many believe that this constitution gave solutions to the critical demands of the nations and nationalities by

putting in place a system that realized the objective realities of the country's political and socioeconomic situations.

Though a lot of other reasons could be cited, one of the key reasons why Ethiopians had faced a complicated political instability and a state of destitution for hundreds of years is that a political system and approach, with which the former leaders of this nation uphold, aimed at creating a favorable environment only for the benefits and interests of some individual groups with the expense of the entire nation.

Whatever our attitude toward the current Ethiopian political powers may be, as a citizen we have to admit that the federal system, enacted some 20 years ago, has been a very fundamental instrument to creating an Ethiopian sentiment that was eroded during the previous rulers of the country, particularly among the people situated in the secluded border areas of Ethiopia such as Afar, Gambela, Benshangul and Somali regions.

It is also unfair and outrage to deny the fact that the system has guaranteed the forgotten nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia, in matters such as the rights of sharing the country's resources as well as exercising the rights of self administration in their respective constitutional boundaries.

In the history of Ethiopian politics, the existence of some nations and nationalities, which especially live in the border areas of the country, had not been even recognized

until recently. However the regimes used to claim these areas as part of their ruling territorial boundaries neglecting the importance of the inhabitants.

Through different systems and strategies carefully designed on the basis of the federal structure, the resources of the country are now being distributed to each and every autonomous regional administrative fairly. In this regard we have been observing the representatives of nations and nationalities of Ethiopia debating with unrestricted freedom on the arrangements of resource sharing in the house of federation meetings.

Although there are differences in the revenue generating capacities of the regions, a plausible system has been created to sharing the country's revenue in order to realizing an equity based development strategy.

As a result of this many parts of the country where there were no a single formal school or health center and appropriate roads before 20 years ago, now are able to have much more social services on their door. Anyone who traveled to some parts of Ethiopia can simply realize and vividly see the changes made in the last two decades.

Unless we made ourselves irrational and pessimist, it is real and observable that regions that had been forgotten and inaccessible for many centuries now are being connected to the rest of the country through different kinds of communication infrastructures like roads and telecommunication services. The expansion of electricity

throughout the country is also well underway with fair distribution.

Attracted with these new infrastructures, we are now able to see many foreign and local investors in these areas of the country. In addition to job opportunities, these investment activities have been helping the region's economic development endeavors in various aspects.

Following the realization of the federal system, the government has been implementing huge education programs aimed at expanding the sector throughout the country with fair allocation.

Accordingly, regions like Afar, Benshangul Gumuz, Gambela and Somali, are now for the first time in their history able to host big universities and other higher educational institutions.

Owing to the expansion of schools in every rural kebeles and woredas of these regions, the primary and secondary education enrolments of the regions have also been improved drastically, which is vital for the improvements of the livelihoods of their people.

Due to the previous abandon by the former political powers, the number of educated people, who are capable of administering and managing any offices in some regions, were almost none during the beginning of the new federal system.

However, as a result of a relentless efforts made by the federal government towards the expansion of education in various levels in every regional states, now the regions are also able to have their own professionals and skilled manpower that can oversee all the activities around government offices in their respective constituencies.

The number of new faces of Ethiopian students in higher education institutions is alarmingly increasing in the last few years.

Though, a lot of more efforts are needed in the future, the introduction of education in to these regions has also helped to the socioeconomic development of the people. These people now are taking a huge stride in finding solutions to their economic development challenges.

The social wellbeing of the rural communities of these regions is being improved as the level of education and information dissemination gave the society a sort of knowledge and strength to fighting harmful traditional practices which are hindrance for development.

Thanks to the federal system whose major foundation is the equal right of all citizens, the concept and importance of democratic federal system is being spread across all nations and nationalities of Ethiopia.

All nations, nationalities and peoples of the country now showing the whole world, that they are the leading guardian of this political arrangement, by which they have enjoyed their full rights for the first time in their history.

These achievements helped these nations to developing strong Ethiopian feelings and belongingness, essential for

the genuine alliance to building a muscular and a prosperous new Ethiopia. Now the entire people of Ethiopia are showing the whole world, that they are the principal protector of this political arrangement, by which they have been provided with a glimmer of hope for a better and prosperous Ethiopia.

These significant determinations are being demonstrated in various occasions in the recent history of the country.

One important incident in this regard could be the invasion of the Eritrean. During the war all Ethiopians, including those in border regions like Afar, Benshangul Gumuze, Gambella and Somali, which was very unusual before, volunteered to join the war effort. And with the full and genuine participation of the general public, the invaders were chased away from the Ethiopian territory with a disgrace defeat.

The other incident that supports the above idea is the elections held in the country. The national elections, notably the 2005 election, in which political groups like the former Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) lectured about the danger of Ethiopian federal system, have also proved the strong determination and commitment of nations and nationalities of this country to pay whatever price required for the continuation of the existing federal system.

Though these opposition political contestants restlessly preached about the importance of dismantling the existing political structure during the election campaigns, the vast

majority of the people reprimanded them using its vote, for they are against the idea of obstructing federal system that promotes the equality of all nations and nationalities of the country in all aspects of political participation and economic resources distribution.

The other most important recent incident in this regard could also be the reaction of Ethiopians to the sudden death of their former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.

Unless we are unrealistic, the death of Meles and the subsequent genuine reaction of the nation could made us sense easily how Ethiopians have been building strong confidence towards the current political economy system and determined to sustain it for a better future.

The heartfelt mourn as well as the pledges to continue Meles's political and development visions, demonstrated during Meles's death; also indicates that Ethiopians are benefiting with great satisfaction from this political economic establishment and are ready to fight any attempts to reversing this reality.

Thus Ethiopians are now very optimist about their future prosperity and committed to defend any attempts of hindrance for they have clearly understood that reversing the present system would lead to sever disintegration and human agony.

In my view, the economic development that Ethiopia has been registering in the last consecutive nine years for the

first time in its history is also the result of strong unity and cooperation Ethiopians developed in the courses of exercising their rights based on the federal system.

In spite of the fact that there are a number of challenges in the implementation, the choice of the new Ethiopian federal system has been attracting enormous applauds and appreciation by many of prominent international and local scholars for it is being tested for its encouraging achievements in the last two decades. This was also observed in the recent international conference on federalism held in Addis Ababa.

What we can understand from these recent phenomenon is that these nations and nationalities have realized and are enjoying with great satisfaction the benefits of the newly established political arrangement. They have been developing strong confidence and Ethiopian sentiment.

And thus they have fully endorsed their willingness to live within the framework of the federal system and fight any attempts to reversing this reality. The demonstration of this strong support for the new Ethiopia should have been a very good lesson to those who are engaged in feeble propaganda against the system.

There is one important thing all Ethiopian opposition political groups and the so called international human rights and democracy activists, should bear in mind. Although the level of development in all regions varies in some aspects, all nations and nationalities of Ethiopia are now optimist and have been building a very strong

confidence and hope on the federal system's future prospects with Ethiopian feelings and belongingness.

Any groups that try to hamper this hope and feelings will be their eternal enemy, for any attempts of reversing the current political and economic approach would lead to severe social unrest and disintegration which no mankind on earth wish to see.

So I would like at least to see some respect and appreciation from these groups, to the wills of Ethiopian nation and nationalities if they are really activists of democracy. Especially our politicians, inside and abroad, should stop instigating evil propaganda against the already established unity in the diversified country, for the sake of their beloved country and people.

In my belief, the noble act useful for Ethiopia would be engaging in constructive activities aimed at further strengthening the existing positive achievements I have just discussed in this commentary.