

## **Multiethnic (Multinational) Federalism in Plural Societies: Does It Make a Difference?**

by Tesfaye Habisso, November 04, 2010

### **Introduction**

In the wake of the downfall of the military government in May 1991, the new rulers of Ethiopia that ousted the junta paved the way toward the establishment of a federal democratic republic after more than a century of absolutist and centralized unitary state under monarchical (1889-1974) and military rule (1974-1991). The *raison d'être* for adopting a multiethnic federal institutional design and form of state was to do away with the centralist and assimilationist policies of the past successive regimes and the unequal sharing of the economic and political resources of the country as well as the denial of the right of nations, nationalities and peoples to administer themselves through their own leaders and their age-old politico-legal institutions, which had been the root causes of internecine conflicts and civil war for so long in the nation's history. In brief, the main aims were to address the vexed questions that were raised and articulated by the past generation of progressive forces of the country: the National Question and the Resource Issue. The federal form of state and government is now a decade and half old and it is time to assess its performance so far and formulate appropriate strategies and institutions to a better future on our journey to a democratic and prosperous federal state. This article is evoked by the genuine and unadulterated views of common people gathered together to air their understanding of "federalism in Ethiopia and what it meant to them; these were the words I personally heard face to face with the Benishangul-Gumuz people's representatives gathered in a town hall meeting in Asosa, Benishangul-Gumuz, a week ago. The thought-provoking words of the many participants that filled the large hall in Asosa can be paraphrased thus:

*"federalism means everything to us: It means recognition of our ethnic identity as a people and our group identities as Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Komo, & Mao; it means self-administration and being represented at the central government level [self-rule and shared rule]; it means more and better roads, clinics, potable water points, schools; it means a new and large university being constructed for us by the federal government. In the past we were providers of gold and slaves to the central government during Emperor Menelik II, gold and tax in the reigns of Emperor Haile Sellassie and the Derg without any say on our local affairs as well as any representation at the centre; now, we are masters of our own destiny and equitably represented at the central government level, with the central government(House of Federation where we are also represented deliberating on and deciding on the budget formula) providing us block financial grants annually and also availing for us special support funds to rectify development disparity amongst the regions that has been the legacy of unjust past regimes of Ethiopia. In short, federalism means more than we can say or express in words."*

Even though I have not participated in the other town hall meetings that have taken place in the other regions such as Amhara, Oromia, Somali, Dire Dawa, Afar, SNNP,

etc., I am told by organizers of these public gatherings that the tone and spirit of the common people is very similar to that of the Benishangul-Gumuz participants, as mentioned here above.

Though one would wonder whether there are any correlations or causal relationships between federalism and the positive political, social and economic achievements that the cross-section of the Benishangul-Gumuz population at the town hall meeting narrated so enthusiastically, it would be unreasonable, I think, to brush them off as trivial emotional outbursts of the common people who always reminisce and reflect upon their trials and tribulations of the past and their current achievements in all walks of life since 1991. Yes, recognizing their ethnic identity and empowering the various peoples of Ethiopia via constitutionally guaranteeing their inalienable rights to self-determination (self-rule and shared rule), one would safely assert, has undoubtedly mobilized these peoples to promote and cherish unity in diversity and to jointly and collaboratively rally around with the other peoples of Ethiopia toward the common cause of promoting interdependence and solidarity and accelerating economic development in order to build one robust economic and political community of Ethiopia. It is, I believe, proper to recall at this juncture the paraphrased words of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in this regard that were echoed by WIKIPEDIA, THE FREE ENCYCLOPEDIA, in December 2009:

**“... In response to critics who say ethnic federalism can bring divisions, Meles Zenawi said this policy serves many interests, including equitable distribution of wealth and empowerment of ethnicities. He also said that since this was how the nationalities were before colonization ethnicity was the language they understood best. He said the ethnic base of Ethiopia’s democracy stemmed from the government’s fight against poverty and the need for an equitable distribution of the nation’s wealth: peasants must be enabled to make their own decisions in terms of their own culture. Power must be devolved to them in ways that they understand, and they understand ethnicity...Other approaches to development had been hegemonic and exploitative and had led to internecine strife and civil war... If you think that ethnic federalism is a threat, it will be; if you think that it is a benefit, then, it will be..Ethnicity will become less an issue as the economy grows and Ethiopia’s process of assimilation does its job”**

Be this as it may, there are a number of questions asked as regards the viability of multiethnic or multinational federalism in particular and federal institutions in general as appropriate constitutional/institutional designs for heterogeneous societies such as Ethiopia. Many scholars pose the question: Are federal institutions capable of operating in least developed states where complex social, economic, political and territorial issues and ethnic diversity simultaneously exist? Further, what are the prerequisites for the practical management of a federal arrangement? And, what model of federalism is best suited to address the problems faced by plural or divided societies? These are some of the most important challenges to federalism. The analysis is even more complicated if we consider a “democratising” state, such as Ethiopia—one in a process of transition from a century-old authoritarian past to a democratic political system where the rule of law reigns, democratic culture flourishes and individual and group rights are strongly protected.

This paper does not, at the moment, attempt to present the Ethiopian experience of federalism over the last decade and half (which I will shortly deal with through field

research and empirical evidence on the ground) but try to interrogate the leitmotif of federalism, multiethnic federalism and issues surrounding these salient constitutional matters in yesterday's and today's world that may serve as food for thought in my soon-to-begin research on Ethiopian federalism.

Before going any further, and as social scientists often forewarn, the discussion of "multiethnic federalism" or "multinational federalism" (which are often used interchangeably) must start with a conceptual definition of these terminologies because these two concepts are almost equated with "evil" in many people's minds in Ethiopia today, as in other countries of the world. This is briefly discussed here below.

Modern federal states can be divided into three basic categories according to the role they play in dealing with ethno-linguistic and cultural issues. The first is that of **mono-national federations**. These are not necessarily ethnically homogenous like Austria or Germany, they can be heterogeneous, but in the latter case their member states are not ethno-regional units, and their population is integrated by a common political and national consciousness and the unified identity of the population. A typical example of a mono-national federation with an ethnically heterogeneous (multi-cultural) population is the United States, but Australia and federal states in Latin-America can also be included in this category. In these countries federalism is only linked to the national question in a historical sense as it used to be a tool to unify the state and build the nation, but in a structural sense it is not so any more. From a structural and functional perspective they do not aim at the institutionalization of national-ethnic differences or the protection of minorities, instead, they work as territorial power-sharing systems, which basically intend to articulate regional differences, the decentralization of administration, and the provision of democratic checks and balances [Jozsef Juhasz 2005, 246].

Countries which are nationally and ethnically heterogeneous and work in a federal structure at least partially based on national and ethnic heterogeneity (i.e. at least some of their member states are ethno-regional units) are usually called **ethno-federations**. They are also referred to as **multi-ethnic or multi-national federations**, but these two latter terms have a more restrictive sense: they designate two versions of broadly defined ethno-federalism. **Multi-ethnic federations** in this narrower sense refer to those ethno-federal countries where—like in mono-national forms—the population is united by state patriotism and a unified identity of the population and/or where the demographic composition is characterized by the predominance of the majority nation. In these cases federation together with other institutions of consociation can be a successful means to handle linguistic and ethnic differences and conflicts. A typical example of such a multi-ethnic federation is Switzerland (where everybody defines themselves as Swiss first, and only belongs to one or other ethnic group or canton with a secondary group identity), but many analysts say that post-Soviet Russia and India are moving towards this form too[ibid].

On the other hand, the former Socialist federal states and today's Bosnia-Herzegovina are considered to be **multi-national federations**, where the individual ethnic groups (or a majority of them, like in the Soviet case) had or have a separate national identity. Therefore, for this system, the loyalty of each nation is mainly linked to their own national member state, and the link to the union is secondary, through the member states. The success of multi-national federations basically depends on whether the individual nations are linked together by some kind of a common long-lasting

political interest. Due to the lack or weakness of common state-nation patriotism, only this can lead to internal cohesion, otherwise sheer power remains the only uniting force. As far as federation trends are concerned, the European Union is obviously moving towards this system [ibid].

Advocates of multi-national federations seek ‘to unite people who seek the advantages of a common political unit, but differ markedly in descent, language and culture’ [Forsyth 1989, p.4]. Multi-national federations involve the maintenance of two or more nations, and reject the strongly integrationist and assimilationist dispositions of national (mono-national) federalists. Multi-national federalists believe that it is possible for the citizens of such federations to have dual or multiple loyalties, e.g. a patriotic attachment to the federation and a nationalist attachment to their regional homeland. They believe it is wrong to assume *a priori* either that multi-national federations will lead to the abuse of the rights, interests and identities of regional minorities, or that they will necessarily make secessionists victorious [Brendan O’Leary 2003, 12].

### **Rationale for Adopting Federalism in Multiethnic Societies**

Federalism is a system of government in which a written constitution divides power between a central government and regional or sub-divisional governments. Both types of government are supreme within their proper sphere of authority. Both have to consent (agree) to any changes to the constitution. Furthermore, federalism is a concrete manifestation of the right to internal self-determination of specific communities in a multi-ethnic or multi-national state [Dietmar Kneitschel 2004, 25]. A federation, on the other hand, is a polity in which decision-making power is divided between central and regional governments [Lijphart 1999, 186].

Many scholars and commentators forcefully argue that in today’s world, ethnic and cultural diversity must be seriously addressed through recognizing the right of national self-determination of these ethnic and cultural groups and thus all efforts of constitutional engineering to realize the concept and right of self-determination must inevitably lead to forms of federalism; federal arrangements are seen as interesting solutions to accommodating differences among populations divided by ethnic or cultural cleavages yet seeking a common political order [Standard Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Jan 5, 2008].

In fact, for Rousseau, good government was not possible in countries with large populations or vast territories without some form of federalism. James Madison saw federalism as a way to provide collective goods covering a large territory without sacrificing local accountability [Jonathan Rodden 2005, 21].

Federalism is a concrete manifestation of the right to internal self-determination of specific communities in a multi-ethnic or multi-national state. A federal structure of the state has the potential to accommodate the legitimate aspirations of all ethnic, linguistic or religious communities for self-government and protection of their distinct cultural and religious identities, while at the same time guaranteeing equal participation by all communities and by all citizens in the political and economic affairs of the country as a whole. Thus, federalism is considered as a multi-layered political structure that facilitates both unity and diversity: “The federal idea, in short, is generally conceived as

a compromise, conveyed by the image of checks and balances between unity and diversity, autonomy and sovereignty, the national and regional.” (Smith 2001, p.5) It is a system that allows for a balance between “...the preservation of the autonomy, the self-consciousness, and the influence of territorially concentrated social groups, on the one hand, (and) desires for a strong country-wide community on the other.”(Simeon/Swinton 1995, p.7) So federalism comes into play as a reasonable design for a political system that secures social unity and political stability within (culturally/ethnically) divided societies.

Federalism is considered as a means to live with cultural diversity. The federal political order allows space to the expression of different identities or diversities within a country. It is a political order that allows for the peaceful coexistence of people of varying cultures within one country. It is as well a device for nation building (or the preservation of a nation) as for the preservation and the protection of sub-national political communities. From the point of view of the individual, federalism requires the establishment of multiple loyalties and it facilitates the expression of several identities (being Québécois and Canadian; Corsican and French; [Oromo and Ethiopian]; Tamil Nadu and Indian; Scot and British): “In a stable federal system, the division of jurisdiction between the two orders of government is duplicated by dual identities and loyalties in the psyche of each citizen.” (Cairns 1995, p.34)

However, the question still remains why exactly federalism is an appropriate form of governance in multiethnic societies. Further, we need to ask if federations that are constructed on the basis of ethno-regional markers facilitate the establishment of a dual identity or, as their critics maintain, reinforce, or even reify ethnic, linguistic and/or religious divisions and thus make inter-communal tensions and fragmentation even more probable.

In order to answer these questions, we need to have a look at the empirical evidence as well as the theoretical assumptions concerning federalism. The empirical examples give, at first sight, a rather unclear picture: some federations, such as Switzerland, have been successful in accommodating diversity; others, such as Yugoslavia or Pakistan, have been failures, while still others hang in the balance, such as Canada and Nigeria. We are therefore led to assume that the successful working of a federal system, whether multi-ethnic or other model, depends largely on the particular federal arrangement, its context and the symbolic meanings behind the identificatory boundaries upon which such federalism is constructed. It is necessary to have a closer look at the institutional variations in which a federal system can occur.

Apart from the defining characteristics mentioned above, federal systems can take a variety of shapes and there is no single “model” of federalism! The qualifying adjectives, which are added to the word, such as “quasi-federalism”, “centralized federalism”, “decentralized federalism”, “symmetrical federalism”, “asymmetrical federalism”, “cooperative federalism” or “executive federalism” give a first glance at this diversity. If we have a look at the existing, real federal systems around the world (for example, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, India, Malaysia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Switzerland and the United States), we realize that each federal system is a system *sui generis* (or unique to each country or state), both in circumstances which

gave birth to it and in the forms that it takes: the relation between the governments on the different levels, the degree to which the subunits are represented within central institutions and the allocation of powers and competencies, differ tremendously between those federal systems.

Some federations emerged from a voluntary contract between previously autonomous states, such as the United States, Switzerland and Canada. In these cases, autonomous states transferred part of their powers to a new central authority. In other cases, unitary states undertook a constitutional reform and restructured as federal systems, so powers were given from an existing national government to the newly created subunits. The second mechanism, which is rather seldom, holds true for Ethiopia and Belgium.

The existing federal systems also differ with regard to their formation. Federalism, when considered as a principle, can be realized in highly different institutional arrangements and political mechanisms. In fact, there is a wide range of federal types and no federal system can be simply adopted and introduced in another state because each institutional design has to consider the specific ethnic composition of a country, the existing identities, the political cleavage structure, its socio-economic state and its history, in short, the “**spirit and soul of the people**”, as the great 18<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Montesquieu, stated a long time ago.

Thus any federal institutional system in Ethiopia may borrow features from existing federal systems but in its overall structure it is likely to be unique to Ethiopia. Multi-ethnic or multi-national federalism, it is widely believed among social and political elites in Ethiopia, was adopted as a response to the age-long aspirations of Ethiopia’s diverse “nations, nationalities and peoples” (more than eighty ethno-cultural-linguistic communities or ethnic groups) as forcefully propagated by the Ethiopian Student Movement and numerous progressive forces of the country since the 1960s and 1970s for self-rule and shared-rule and vehemently opposed to the policy of forceful centralization and assimilation pursued by the past successive regimes of the country. Thus, the programme of multi-ethnic federalism undoubtedly reflects the “soul and spirit” of the heterogeneous Ethiopian “nations, nationalities and peoples” for self-rule and shared rule-- in short, to build one strong political and economic community-- and today multi- ethnic federalism just works well for them, even though some advocates of mono-national federalism and the now defunct ideology of the nation-state model of nation-building do not support it at all. On the contrary, some political forces such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) believe that the implementation of multi-ethnic federalism is still not deep enough, that is, the FDRE Constitution that recognizes the constitutional right of self-determination, including the right to secession is not fully and satisfactorily implemented due to the ruling party’s and state’s alleged centralizing role.

### **Does Multi-ethnic or Multi-national Federalism Work for Ethno-Culturally Heterogeneous Societies?**

The answer depends on whom you ask. If you ask many citizens of India, Ethiopia, Canada, Switzerland, and Belgium, they would say ‘yes’. Many people in other countries in Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia are resistant to the idea of

accommodating national and ethnic communities through federal institutions. For them, federalism in general, and multi-ethnic federalism in particular, is a dirty word and a detestable phrase. For the ICG ([“Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism And Its Discontents”](#), African Report No. 153, 4 September 2009) and vociferous Ethiopian Diaspora in US America, Europe and elsewhere, multi-ethnic federalism is nothing but a recipe for a “violent eruption” of endless inter-communal conflicts leading eventually to the disintegration or dissolution of the Ethiopian state, an evil project deliberately and maliciously pursued by the TPLF/EPRDF party and government toward that end, so goes their pathetic stance. In Western Europe, the French are hostile to federalism. Americans, those who live in the world’s first and longest enduring federation, like federalism but tend to be against using it to give self-government to distinct peoples. They consciously drew the internal boundaries of their own federation to avoid this. “Today, when many international experts recommend federalism for other countries, such as Iraq, it is also a non-ethnic model they usually have in mind: a federation in which internal boundaries intersect with rather than coincide with ethnic and national boundaries”.

The widespread opposition to multi-ethnic or multi-national federalism is connected to the belief that it does not work. It is thought that giving self-government to territorially concentrated distinct peoples and ethnic-linguistic groups unleashes centrifugal forces that result in the break-up or breakdown of the state. Critics of multi-ethnic or multi-national federalism like to point, in particular, to the experience of post-communist Eastern Europe.

While all of communist Eastern Europe’s unitary states stayed together after 1989, all three of its multi-national federations (the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia) fell apart. The federations also experienced more violent transitions than the unitary states. Before this, multi-national federations that were formed in the wake of decolonisation had a similarly abysmal track record. They fell apart in the Caribbean (the Federation of the West Indies); in east Africa (the East African Federation and the Ethiopia-Eritrea Federation); in northern Africa (the United Arab Republic); in western Africa (Senegambia); southern Africa (Northern and Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland); and in Asia (Pakistan, the Union of Malaya). The Nigerian pseudo-federation managed to stay together, but only after a brutal civil war and decades of military dictatorship. It would be difficult to argue, in the light of this evidence, that federalism is a panacea for ethnically and culturally diverse (plural) states. It also seems clear that giving national/ethnic groups their own federal units provides them with resources that they can use to launch secessionist movements, should they choose to.

But does the evidence also indicate, as some critics suggest, that ethnic or multi-national federalism will not work in any circumstances? Plainly, the answer is no. Critics point to evidence of failure, but there are also important success stories. Two of the world’s oldest federal states, Canada and Switzerland, effectively give self-government to their principal ethnic, linguistic or national communities. The success of Canada, which has longstanding issues with its own secessionist movement, in keeping ethnic conflict in check is noteworthy, and even more so in Switzerland, whose ethnic-based federalist system has successfully managed conflicts between four different ethnic groups for centuries.

More recently, Belgium has reorganized itself as an ethnic federation, and Spain has also assumed several multi-ethnic federal traits. Most notably, India, the post-colonial world's most successful democracy, and the world's largest, is also an "ethno-federal" state.

Clearly, multi-ethnic federalism is no panacea and won't work everywhere; as some commentators suggest, for instance, it wouldn't work under current conditions in Israel/Palestine. But, overall, it has been a great success in Switzerland, Belgium, Canada, and a number of other countries. By allowing each ethnic/cultural-linguistic community to have control of those regions of the country where it is in the majority, while respecting basic minority rights, it prevents the kind of zero-sum power struggle between groups that is likely to occur in an ethnically divided society where all the power is in the hands of the central government.

Astonishingly, critics of multi-ethnic or multi-national federalism usually fail to note that the major federal failures, including the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Nigeria, were, in practice, sham or pseudo-federations. In several cases, they were forced together. They were often, in practice, tightly centralized states. They lacked democracy. This last fact alone meant that their governments were unrepresentative of their populations, and that there was no possibility of dialogue or cooperation among their different national communities. It is hardly surprising that their minorities broke free when the opportunity arose. All of the communist and post-colonial federations that broke apart were economically weak. Because of corruption or the shortcomings of central planning, they could not provide a responsible or growing standard of living for their populations. Relatively enterprising regions of these states, such as Slovenia or the Baltic republics, found this particularly difficult to deal with.

Critics of multi-ethnic federalism would be on stronger ground if they could show that any of the federal failures could have been democratically governed as unitary states or as American-type federations, as suggested by the International Crisis Group ("Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents") or by David Ciepley ("Minimizing Conflict in Multi-ethnic Democracy: The Case for Dispersed Constituency Democracy"). However, there is little evidence to support such a view. Even Lenin, who was strongly opposed to multi-ethnic federalism, understood that accepting it was the only way to hold the Soviet Union together. Tito was similarly forced to adopt federalism in Yugoslavia against his first preferences.

While only federations broke apart in communist Europe, this glosses over the more basic fact that these were also by far the most nationally diverse states. This explains, after all, why they were federations in the first place. It makes at least as much sense to argue that the instability of these federations resulted from their diversity as from their ethno-federal institutional structures.

The theoretical justification for federalism, or decentralization, is based on the combination of shared rule and self-rule: federalism offers the potential to retain the territorial integrity of the state while providing some form of self-governance for disaffected groups. Thus, a growing literature has emphasized the merits of federalism as "peace preserving."

Notable, however, is a set of countervailing arguments that include diametrically opposed hypothesis and empirical research reaching very different conclusions. While some argue that federal institutions reduce the likelihood of armed conflict by providing sub-national challengers with institutional channels for voicing their demands, others suggest that such institutions may encourage nationalist mobilization and/or separatist conflict.

Some studies have indicated four key findings in this regard. First, fiscal decentralization increases the likelihood of ethnic rebellion and ethnic protest in contexts where there are high levels of inter-regional inequality. Second, large, encompassing national governing parties increase the likelihood of armed conflict, ethnic rebellion, and ethnic protest when minority regions are excluded from those parties. Third, inter-regional inequality increases the likelihood of ethnic rebellion when ethnic groups are regionally concentrated. Fourth, increased fiscal transfers by central governments to decentralized governments serve to reduce the likelihood of ethnic protest when ethnic groups are regionally concentrated. [Kristien M.B. & Erik Wibbels, “ Diversity, Disparity, and Civil Conflict in Federal States”].

In a seminal work, S. Rufus Davis argued that there was no causal relationship between federalism and anything else:

*“The truth of the matter is.... and experience has been the teacher...that some ‘federal’ systems fail, some do not; some promote a great measure of civil liberty, some do not; some are highly adaptive, some are not... Whatever their condition at any one time... it is rarely clear that it is so because of their federalness, or the particular character of their federal institutions, or the special way they practice federalism, or in spite of their federalness.”* [S. Rufus Davis, [The Federal Principle](#), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, pp. 211-212]

If Davis is right, then federalism may be associated in some cases with a rise in the frequency and intensity of ethnic problems, and in other cases with a decline in the frequency and intensity of such problems. That is, no consistent relationship would exist between federalism and the rise or decline of ethnic problems, as some critics fret to portray.

The preponderance of scholarly work on the issue in Africa and elsewhere supports the Davis thesis, i.e. it suggests that federalism is not consistently related to the promotion or settlement of ethnic problems. Further, as Robert McKown contends, “neither a federal nor a unitary constitution is a solution to multi-culturally based problems but a structural context within which they may be confronted”. Yet, federalism continues to be viewed by some leaders of minority groups in Africa as a solution to, and by some leaders of majority groups as a cause of, such problems. This brings us to the problematic of federalism: Why would these leaders advocate or oppose something which has not proved to consistently cause or solve ethnic problems? There is no satisfactory answer provided yet.

### **By Way of Conclusion**

Finally, it must be clearly and firmly stated that it is absolutely difficult to formulate abstract generalizations about federal institutions and the prospects for their stability, since it might well be that institutions that work perfectly in one context will fail to

perform if transplanted to another. This paper rejects the notion that federalism can be a one-size-fits-all solution to ethnic and other forms of intrastate conflict. Instead, it proposes a vision of federalism deeply rooted in the specific features of diverse societies.

Some systems that name themselves “federal” in their constitution would not be given this attribute from another point of view, or, to put it differently, “federalism” means different things at different places and different times, so also “multi-ethnic/multi-national federalism” in Ethiopia today. And, multi-ethnic federalism in Ethiopia will succeed if it serves as a political tool and institutional design to manage our ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, to equitably share the political and economic resources of the country, and strengthen our democratic unity based on equality as well as our capability to solve the ever-nagging problems of underdevelopment, and the intermittent/internequine ethnic conflicts over resources, identity and state power. It will undoubtedly fail if it cannot help us resolve these problems and if it is not widely embraced, based on its performance, by the majority of the political and social elites as well as the general populace of Ethiopia. Furthermore, it should be well understood that neither federalism/ multi-ethnic federalism, nor any other constitutional arrangement, can be a panacea for resolving ethnic conflicts or other socio-economic and political problems in Ethiopia or elsewhere. Whatever the case, multi-ethnic federalism is destined to stay with us for a long time to come; it will, of course, survive for longer time, if and only if it continues to enjoy the wide support of the majority of the Ethiopian population and the political and social elites at home and abroad. On the other hand, it is bound to fail, as any constitutional engineering or experiment by ruling elites, the day it is denied such overwhelming support, which seems not the case as the prevailing reality strongly shows in Ethiopia today. Lastly, I would like to conclude the paper with the thought-provoking words of one of our best economists of modern-day Ethiopia, Dr Eshetu Chole:

***“...Politically, the era of centralization seems to have come to an end, and this is as it should be. A multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious society such as ours cannot and should not be administered in a highly centralized manner. That people in their respective localities have the right to administer themselves, exercise a degree of command over their own resources, and develop their own cultures and languages must be taken as axiomatic...But there must also be unity within diversity. In the past we emphasized unity at the expense of diversity, and we have paid dearly for it. Let us hope that now we will not move to the other extreme and emphasize diversity at the expense of unity.” [Eshetu Chole, “Ethiopia At the Crossroads...”, DIALOGUE, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia].***

If Dr Eshetu Chole is right, then, it would be unwise of us to brush aside multi-ethnic federalism as a mistaken or misguided model of federalism. Let us see how it works and judge it over its performance and outcome in the years to come instead of categorically condemning this novel experiment or project as unworkable and destructive. It is as Prime Minister Meles Zenawi succinctly put: “If we think that ethnic federalism is a threat, it will be; if we think that it is a benefit, then, it will be.” It does not require to be a genius to choose between these two conflicting thoughts. Let us then utilize multi-ethnic federalism to our own benefit so that it does not become a threat at any moment in the years to come.

Lastly, let us not forget that Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious national state. Under these circumstances, ethnicity and ethnic identity as well as cultural and religious diversity cannot be wished away; instead, these could serve us as “organizing principles”, and such diversities could be managed through internal self-determination. It is worth noting the late Samora Machel of Mozambique who, at a stage, decided to try the policy “for the sake of the nation, the tribe must die,” but found out his mistake in due time. Let us not fall into the trap of making that same mistake ever. For God and Our Country!