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RESEARCH ARTICLE

122 VISUALIZING THE INVISIBLE CURSES OF ETHNIC POLITICS IN THE ETHIOPIAN FEDERAL SYSTEM.

Nigus Belay Gessese and P. Premanandam.

Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, India.

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Abstract

The issue of ethnic politics has increasingly attracted the attention of many political scientists in the contemporary period. This growing interest emanates from the proliferation of violent conflicts along ethnic lines because of unequal power and resource allocation among the different ethnic groups of the world. It is not arguable that the prevalence of violent conflict is a great obstacle for the maintenance of internal peace and a critical challenge for nation-building in multi-ethnic nations, most particularly in Africa. Since independence, unmanageable and more problematic conflicts resulting in ethnic cleansing and genocide have repeatedly seen in Africa due to politicized ethnicity, an inconvenient leftover from European colonialism. Nevertheless, the situations of ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia are not a European colonial legacy; rather the results of repression, highly centralized and the narrow ethnocentric political system of the country. Ethiopians, like other Africans, have faced the experience of political domination, economic exploitation, socio-cultural marginalization and religious discrimination from the three successive regimes of Ethiopia: the imperial, Derg and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), under the guise of nation-building project. Thus, this paper tries to visualize the invisible curses of ethnic politics in the Ethiopian federal system, which was installed by the EPRDF in 1991.

***Corresponding Author:- Nigus Belay Gessese.**

Introduction:-

The issue of ethnic politics has increasingly attracted the attention of many political scientists in the contemporary period. This growing interest arises from the proliferation of violent conflicts along ethnic lines because of unequal power and resource allocation among the different ethnic groups of the world. It is not arguable that the prevalence of violent conflict is a great obstacle for the maintenance of internal peace and a critical challenge for nation-building in multi-ethnic nations, most particularly in Africa. Since independence, unmanageable and problematic conflicts resulting in ethnic cleansing and genocide have repeatedly seen in Africa due to the politicization of ethnicity, an inconvenient leftover from European colonialism. Unlike in Latin America and Asia, the colonial experience made Africa very fragile and powerless to bring sustainable peace, democracy and development. Subsequently, unending violent conflicts and tensions, ethnic mistrusts and hatred, political instabilities and chaos, famine and migration, and other synonym problems have become the manifestation of the continent.

Historically, ethnic conflict was not too much pronounced in Africa before the outset of European colonialism as the majority of African society had been coexisting with a high degree of mixed interaction and geographical

mobility without using identity boundaries. But such kinds of African traditions were totally changed after the advent of European colonialism. Following the arrival of European powers in the second half of the 19th century, the internal structure of Africa was designed on the basis of colonial frameworks, in which the society was deeply divided, superficially defined and artificially demarcated along ethnic lines. As a result, the new European colonial frameworks, which were exercised through a “divide-and-rule” policy, washed out not only the nationalistic aspiration and anti-colonial struggles, but also planted deep-rooted ethnic hostilities and rivalries within Africans. This enabled the society to start looking at each other suspiciously in all spheres of contact in the post-colonial period (Berman 1998, Rubin 2006).

Therefore, the continuation of the European colonial legacy in the post-colonial period has changed the relationship of Africans from bad to worse. This is mainly due to the fact that, after decolonization, African elites begun to interpret every socio-economic and political issues on the basis of ethnicity and they used it as an instrument to assume political power and to access economic resources and other opportunities (Chabal & Daloz 1999). But the use of ethnicity as a viable means to control the “national cake” leads to the outbreak of violent conflicts in many African countries. Rwanda, Kenya, Sudan, Chad, Congo, Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Uganda have experienced a devastating ethnic strife in the post-colonial period. Even some countries are undergoing dangerous panoramas of dysfunctions and violent conflicts (Adetiba 2013). Thus European colonialism has set the stage of post-colonial African politics along ethnic lines to flash black lights on the image of the continent by precipitating stiff ethno-political competitions and violent conflicts.

Nevertheless, the situations of violent conflicts in modern Ethiopia are not a European colonial legacy rather the results of subjugation, suppression, highly centralized and “the narrow ethnocentric political system of the country” (Merera 2007). Though Ethiopia was not colonized by European colonial powers, the people like other Africans have suffered the experience of political domination, economic exploitation, socio-cultural marginalization and religious discrimination from the three successive governments of modern Ethiopia namely the imperial, Derg and the EPRDF, under the guise of nation-building project.

Violent Conflicts in Ethiopia: Before 1991

The map of modern Ethiopia, which embraces today's regional states, was created at the end of the 19th century through the policy of territorial expansion and forceful assimilation of the imperial monarchy. Evidently, the imperial monarchy applied an extremely centralized government that could not accommodate the ethno-linguistic, socio-cultural and political diversity of the country. The monarchy did not accept the essence of Ethiopia as a multi-ethnic nation because it equated unity with uniformity and boosted extreme centralism as a means to sustain its imperial hegemony. Thus the imperial period was a building block for the emergence of violent conflicts and tensions due to the exacerbation of ethnic inequalities and grievances by suppressing and assimilating the socio-cultural aspects of the different ethnic groups of the country into Amhara core identity through the “Amharanization policy”, in which Amhara's language, culture and religion were promoted, while the different ethnic groups were relegated into the status of “subjected people” or “second citizens”. The Orthodox Church, the imperial court and educational organizations were the main devices of the monarchy to install the “Amharanization policy” and to propagate its legitimacy. These imperial institutions reflected the Amhara core identity as a symbol of Ethiopia by undermining the ethno-linguistic and socio-cultural diversity of the country.

Moreover, the imperial monarchy created a narrow ethnocentric political system to maintain the pre-eminence of Amhara ruling class without sharing political power and economic resources to the “subjected people”. All these imperial oppressions left permanent grievances in the memory of the “subjected people” (Merera 2007). Consequently, various social groups that included the peasants, urban dwellers and intellectuals engaged in the anti-imperial movement since the 1960s. Above all, the Ethiopian students made strong opposition movement to bring radical changes by expressing the desires of the “subjected people” under the banner of ethnicity. They demanded for the realization of the “nationality question” and condemned the imperial land holding system, maladministration,

corruption, economic exploitation and other socio-cultural suppressions. But the imperial monarchy was not even in a position to take some socio-economic and political reforms. At the end, the rigid feudal-bureaucratic rule of the imperial monarchy was replaced by the military dictatorship of the Derg through a popular revolution in September 1974.

The Derg, which inherited a socialist country, gave more power largely to military officials based on their commitments towards its political ideology than ethnic affiliations or regional enclaves. The Derg aimed at strengthening its power by eliminating all opposition forces and bringing radical changes without solving the problems of the imperial past. Even though the Derg culminated the long-rooted problems of the peasantry through land reforms; the absence of clear political program, narrow political space, crippled economic growth and its brutality gave birth to the rise of strong opposition groups mainly from the pan-Ethiopianist political groups (like the EDU, AESM and EPRP) and various ethno-regionalist liberation forces (like the EPLF, TPLF, OLF, ALF, WSLF and many others). The two opposition groups shaped by the Marxist-Leninist political ideology entered into armed insurgencies against the Derg order. Specifically, the ethno-regionalist liberation forces described the Derg regime as an “Amhara rule” in order to mobilize their supporters and fighters along primordial elements to achieve their instrumental objectives. They demanded to ensure the rights of self-determination to their respective groups within the Ethiopian entity, or up to creating independent states. Although the ultimate goals of these ethno-regionalist liberation forces were different on the basis of their historical relationship, the common element was their reliance on ethnic identity as a basis of political mobilization (Vaughan 2003). During the armed struggle, though the ethno-regionalist liberation forces were engaged, the TPLF made a bloodshed civil war for at least seventeen years and overthrow the military government from its power in May 1991.

The Inauguration of the Ethiopian Federal System

The downfall of the Derg regime brought a new ruling party the so-called the EPRDF with a new political system, ethnic federalism, and a new nation nomenclature, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), under the architect of the TPLF. The new ruling regime, the TPLF-led-EPRDF government, hereafter the EPRDF, installed a federal system with the intention of establishing a “New Ethiopia State” with a more prosperous, participatory and representative nation for its people by distributing responsibilities among the different ethnic groups with the objective of keeping the overall territorial integrity of the country and maintaining the peaceful coexistence of the people. For this, ethnicity continued to be a politically mobilizing apparatus of the EPRDF in the process of reconstructing the political landscape of the country (Abbink 2006). Some proponents of the EPRDF government have traced the adaptation of federalism along ethnic lines as a political remedy for the long-existed problems of Ethiopia and its people. They described the EPRDF federal system as an effective and ethically acceptable means of transition to democratic rule in the history of the country. They tried to persuade that the EPRDF has designed its political system in accordance with the basic ideas of federalism as it allowed not only free expression by ethno-cultural communities of their collective identities with their respective forms of living, but also ensured their equal representation and participation in the process of decision making. For them, it is impossible to bring sustainable peace, democracy and development, nor is possible to promote unity-in-diversity without giving political autonomy and sufficient cultural space to all ethnic groups of the country (Andriyas 2003, Alemayehu 2009, Mesfin 2011, Tsegaye 2010).

The proponents further contend that unlike the pre-1991 regimes, which were perpetuated by certain ethnic dominance, setting federalism on the basis of ethnicity as a political system is the best solution to minimize or even to avoid violent conflicts and tensions by ensuring ethnic political dispensation, which was the historical problem of the country. They tried to show the pre-1991 unitary system as a basic political factor for the total failure of the country because of its weakness to give recognition to the “nationality question”. The proponents strongly believe that the arrangement of the Ethiopian federal system along ethnic lines is a response to delegitimize the hegemony of the Amhara ruling class; to comprise historically unprivileged and marginalized ethnic groups in the country’s political scene; and to recognize the distinct identity markers of each ethnic group by giving the right of self-

administration. As a result, the argument of the proponents shows that the coming of the EPRDF to the power centre transformed Ethiopia from an authoritarian country to a federal one by avoiding the previous political injustices, ethnic inequalities, economic exploitations and other socio-cultural oppressions through the introduction of an enabling democratic environment for political pluralism, power devolution, resource distribution and socio-cultural recognition. This is in fact an essential step for the Ethiopian people, who do not know the taste of democracy ever before.

However, the introduction of an ethnic based federal system does not seem to conclude to the formation of a successful and democratic government in Ethiopia. Rather, it becomes a source for several socio-economic and political problems. Different scholars, activists and politicians have forwarded several critics on the aim of the federal framers, institutional capability and practical feasibility of the EPRDF federal system in resolving the old-age problems of the country. Scholars, like Merera (2003), Alem (2005), Abbink (2006), Asebe (2012), claim the EPRDF federal system as a unique political development in its context, in which the records of fulfilling its promises are largely unsuccessful. For example, Abbink (2006) describes the EPRDF federal system as ethnically politicized, deeply divided, democratically unstable, politically rigid and extremely polarized, which gives birth to severe ethno-political competition resulting in violent conflicts and tensions.

Moreover, despite its promises, the EPRDF is less successful than expected in bringing unity-in-diversity and managing ethnic conflicts. As plainly indicated by Markakis (2003) and Abbink (2011) the spread, severity and multiplicity of violent conflicts and tensions in Ethiopia are more persuaded after the adaptation of ethnic federalism. Even though there had long been conflicts in Ethiopia, what is striking is the transformation in the nature and intensity of conflicts over the last three decades. Since 1991, different ethnic groups have fought along ethnic sentiments for real or imagined goals. The conflict between Amhara and Tigray ethnic groups, between Oromo and Somali, between Amhara and Afar, between Arsi and Sidama, between Konso and Derashe, between Borana and Guji, between Dizi and Suri, between Guji and Sidama, between Afar and Karayu, between Afar and Isa, between Karayu and Amhara, between Oromo and Gumuz, between Gumuz and Berta, between Gedeo and Guji, between Sidama and Wollayta, and between Burji and Guji are some of the violent conflicts that have seen after the beginning of the EPRDF federal system. In these violent conflicts, tens of thousands of people were killed, hundreds of thousands were injured, many more were internally displaced and turned in to refugees as well as huge amounts of government and individual properties were destroyed unanimously, which deteriorated the socio-economic and political milieu of the country.

The violent conflicts and tensions are not confined only in certain regions, but also frequently observed in all federal constituents of the country, which makes Ethiopia one of the most conflict-ridden regions in the Horn of Africa. Though the formations of violent conflicts in the Ethiopia have a complicated network of interrelated and a complex interplay of many factors, most of the problems are largely conceived as the products of ethnic politics. Therefore, these trends of violent conflicts and tensions in Ethiopia give me a concrete background to make a thorough scientific research to visualise the invisible curses of ethnic politics in the Ethiopian federal system.

Ethnic Politics in the Ethiopian Federal System and Its Curses

Ethnic politics can be seen as the marriage or interwoven of ethnicity and politics in the process of making the political framework of a multi-ethnic nation. In this political framework, ethnicity figures out more prominently than other identity markers to assume political power and access more economic and social benefits. To attain these opportunities, the political elites, a group of people who are aware of and active either at local, regional or national politics, “draw upon, distort, and sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent in order to protect their well-being or existence or to gain political and economic advantage for their groups as well as for themselves” (Brass 1991). When the politicization of ethnic identity reaches at an extreme edge, it enlarges the exclusionist political space, in which political elites deny all means of resource and political access to others who are not part of their own ethnic groups or patronage networks. They develop ethnic favouritism in order to leave out

other groups, particularly those who are assumed as opponent groups. This develops the association of political loyalty to ethnic membership and affiliation, and thus individuals are often forced to identify with ethnic category and restrict the expression of having multiple identities and avoid the development of civic nationalism (Markakis 2011, Asebe 2012, Muhabie 2016).

Therefore, the arrangement of political structure of a multi-ethnic nation on the basis of ethnicity is a very difficult task. It asks a proper understanding in order to manage its negative consequences. Otherwise, the making of ethnicity as a means of political framework aggravates more problems as it alters public demands into ethnically defined political principle instead of providing proper remedies for the socio-economic and political malaises of diversified societies. Thus politicized ethnicity is potentially a destructive political system as it left a multi-ethnic nation with severe ethnic hostilities and unending conflicts that possibly erode a common national identity and a sentiment of common economic and political destiny (Horowitz 1985).

However, the EPRDF made ethnicity as a leading principle of its political system after holding the power centre in 1991. Since then, ethnicity, as described by Merera (2002) “the cornerstone of all the policy initiatives” of the EPRDF, has become a prime political formula in order to determine territorial boundary, decentralize power, distribute economic resources and other opportunities like employment, education and several life-related chances. Following ethnic revivalism in Ethiopia, political elites have strategically relied on ethnicity in order to exploit its symbols to perpetuate their political, economic and social benefits. To achieve their interests, they mobilize ethnic groups on the basis of ethnic sentiments and illusive emotional sympathy against one another. Thus the practice of politicized ethnicity in Ethiopia “has led to new perceptions of inequality and elite rule to lower levels in the political system” (Abbink 2006), which “appeared to many to be inexplicable, irresponsible and dangerous” (Vaughan 2003).

It is undeniable that well managed ethnic diversity has ample benefits to some multi-ethnic nations like India and Malaysia, in which they use it as a viable means for sustainable economic growth, social mobilization, political transformation and democratization process. But for Ethiopia ethnic diversity is a major challenge as it is highly politicized and exploited by the political elites to achieve their own personal or group benefits. The making of ethnicity as a bone of the EPRDF political system encourages the political elites to compete in controlling economic resources and political power using their superficial ethnic representation. They involve in an acute ethno-political competition, which makes them politically rigid, highly sensitive and restricts their ability to carefully settle their contradictions through mutual tolerance, dialogue and the rule of law. They used ethnicity as a political instrument to seed ethnic sabotages, mistrusts and hatred to achieve their selfish interests at the expense of others. This negative use of ethnicity paves the stage for the rise of persistent political instabilities and violent conflicts. Consequently, the EPRDF federal system has confused the country and could not bring a remarkable economic development, political advancement and democratization process as its federal experiment revolves on the negative track-records of federalism.

Economically, the exercise of ethnic politics retards the economic development of Ethiopia as it paves favourable condition for the expansion of highly networked corruption and rent-seeking political economy. It is perceived that many political elites are widely involved in such kind of corruption and rent seeking political economy on behalf of their ethnic or regional enclaves. This makes Ethiopia to have a low position in the global ranking of per capita income and unable to afford even the most basic needs of its citizens. Even though Ethiopia’s economic growth has repeatedly been reported by the EPRDF in double digits since 2003, the country ranked 173rd out of 187 countries in human development index (UNDP 2013); and following Angola and Chad, Ethiopia ranked worst in the new food index (Oxfam 2014) on the basis of four core concerns for consumers. Moreover, eight to fifteen million people have been suffered from lack of food in 2015/16.

The basic reason for such chronic economic problems is that the political elites are found in fierce competition not only how to control the main economic resources of the country, but also how to get new advantages such as high-scale payment job opportunities, foreign scholarships, huge government funds, loans and excessive

lands for their private investments by using superficial ethnic identity or representation. As clearly opined by Moti (2014), “in Ethiopia, it is widely perceived that the political elites and those favourites with them benefit into the provision of investment land and licensing. Such beneficiaries are given land freely and receive preferential access to credit from the public Banks of Ethiopia.” This diminishes the initiation of productive citizens, increases high unemployment rates of young groups, discourages the expansion of investment activities, and introduces an extremely expensive living standard, miserable life and unstable marketing system. This enforces me to conclude that Ethiopia was economically crippled by the imperial and military regimes, and remained crippled by the corrupt and rent seeking officials of the EPRDF and other link-minded groups.

The exercise of ethnic politics in Ethiopia also affects the distribution of national resources, which is partly due to inappropriate allocation of industries and development projects to favour certain ethnic groups without considering genuine feasibility or the viability of proper industrial locations. This creates uneven economic development which enlarges the economic gap of individuals, groups and regional states. In addition, the practice of ethnic politics further manipulates a precarious relationship among the different ethnic groups of the country. It provokes them to contest over common natural resources (dense forests, grazing lands, water and minerals) as there is no mutual agreement among ethnic groups or regional states on some ethnographic or regional boundaries. The problem of ethnic or regional boundary demarcation makes the issue of ethnic claim very sensitive and more problematic due to the emergence of deep ethno-regional competition to access these common natural resources exclusively (Vaughan 2003).

In addition to its economic effects, the exercise of ethnic politics in Ethiopia has created multi-layered political problems such as the abuse of power, poor governance, weak political leadership and unstable political structures and processes. These multi-layered political problems are largely emanated from the emergence of incompetent political leadership. Since 1991, the selection of political candidates in Ethiopia has been based on where the candidate came from rather than on the right candidate for the right political leadership. The EPRDF gives much more emphasis to ethnic identity, in which much weight is given for ethnocracy than meritocracy to embrace political positions. Though the EPRDF has recently appointed some young political leaders in some selected political positions, the consequence of which is that these young leaders were not selected based on merit but rather on the basis of where they came from. After closely observing the appointment procedure, (Birhanu 2007) concludes that ethnic identity becomes the lens of the EPRDF to screen out candidates for political leadership, while non-primordial qualities or professionalism like individual experience, character, vision, leadership ability, commitment, interest and knowledge are not considered vital criteria. Thus the use of ethnic-based leadership selection has retarded the political advancement of Ethiopia from having national leaders who are ready to serve with passion and commitment other than those who are sentimental along ethnicity. In this effect, members of different ethnic groups tend to identify with their co-ethnics because they believe that a political office holder, at any administrative level, from their respective ethnic group could represent their share of the “national cake” though they may not get it via the appointee. Even some ethnic groups have begun to support political elites regardless of their malfeasance and corruption behaviours.

Moreover, ethnic politics promotes the development of ethnic consciousness as a particular ethnic ideology in Ethiopia. It entrenches ethnic nationalism, which is a tendency to see one’s self as a member of an ethnic group rather than as a member of an Ethiopian citizenship. Unlike to the Indian experience, the fundamental principle of the Ethiopian federal system “is loyalty to a separate identity, the ethnic one, as superior to an overall national identity” (Aalen and Hatlebakk 2008). This constitutes a major obstacle for the development of national integration and cohesion as no one worry about Ethiopia except his/her own ethnic group or region. Similarly, ethnic politics contributes more to political polarization and fragmentation than to the building of an enabling democratic environment for political pluralism. The EPRDF federal system allows the formation of different political parties based on ethnic alignments with the purpose of controlling the political space by developing political enmity against one another, which generates structural conflicts in the country.

Contrary to a compromise politics, ethnic politics creates a divisive political relationship among the different ethnic groups of the country due to the EPRDF “divide and rule” strategy. The ideology of the EPRDF is not adequately responsive to the diverse social identities; rather it tends to encourage social fragmentation instead of social cohesion. It gives more emphasis for situations that escalate differences and antagonism rather than promoting compromise and cooperation within the society. By instituting ethnic dynamics in the country’s political system, the EPRDF was largely engaged in destroying the national identity (Ethiopianism) via the notion of ethnicity (Abbink 2006). According to Abbink, the EPRDF has deeply divided the country along ethnic boundaries and planted mutual suspicion and animosity among the different ethnic groups in order to stand against one another. In other words, the EPRDF “divide and rule” strategy made ethnic groups to focus on attacking one another rather than standing against its government. Therefore, the EPRDF is largely perceived not only exercising to evade the way of the advancement of common interests of the public, but also preventing any prospect for the establishment of long-lasting political stability and peaceful coexistence within the Ethiopian people.

Finally, ethnic politics paves the political stage of Ethiopia for marginalization and discrimination of people, who are not from a particular ethnic group or region. After the introduction of the EPRDF federal system, members of every ethnic group, particularly those who consider themselves an “indigenous group”, have used the right of self-administration as a constitutional opportunity to claim exclusive control rights over political power, resources, government jobs and other business activities by evicting the settlers, who are considered “non-indigenous groups”, from their local or regional administration. This appears irreconcilable with the constitutional provisions of the EPRDF federal system, which clearly prohibits exclusion on the basis of place of origin, sex, religion, status, ethnic or linguistic relations. The constitution allows for the citizens the rights to have properties, make free movements and resides everywhere in the country without socio-economic marginalization and political discrimination. However, the constitutional provisions are highly abused by political elites since many Ethiopians have faced several atrocities when they move from one region to another for searching of better economic livelihood as migrants or civil servants. Even though we all are Ethiopians, the dichotomy of “indigenous” versus “non-indigenous” ethnic group is developed among us, in which the latter is termed as “migrants”, “settlers”, “outsiders” or in some extreme cases considered as an “invaders”. The resultant effect of group categorization is loyalty to ethnicism rather than promoting the sentiment of Ethiopianism. This reinforces mutual suspicion, fear of domination and unavoidable conflict which are currently observed in many parts of the country and becomes a force of threat for the continuation of living together within the Ethiopian federal system.

Conclusion:-

Even though Ethiopia is a distinguishing country having diversified identities, the imperial monarchy had been strived for building an extremely centralized government by denying the ethno-linguistic, socio-cultural and political diversities of the country. Since the end of the 19th century, the imperial monarchy did not accommodate such diversities as the rulers were not interested to accept the essence of Ethiopia as a multi-ethnic nation. They equated unity with uniformity and boosted extreme centralism as a means to sustain the imperial hegemony. As a result, the imperial period was characterized by violent conflicts and tensions due to the suppression and forceful assimilation of the socio-cultural aspects of the different ethnic groups of the country into the Amhara core identity through the “Amharanization policy”. By extending the edge of ethnic inequalities and grievances, the imperial monarchy created a narrow ethnocratic political system to maintain the pre-eminence of the Amhara ruling class by ignoring the political participation and representation of other ethnic groups. Accordingly the strong opposition movements broke out from different social groups demanding for the realization of the “nationality question” since the 1960s. Because of its failure to carry out the growing public demands, the imperial rule had been replaced by a military dictatorship of the Derg in 1974.

Still the coming of the Derg to power could not bring solution to the quest of the people as its political system denied the different ethnic groups the right to use their own languages in education, arts, courts and other public services. By adopting socialism along Marxist-Leninist political consciousness, the Derg concentrated all powers at

the centre without devolving to the regional and local administrative units. It did not establish an accommodative, accountable and participatory political system that led the people to live in constant fear of the regime's brutal suppression, killings and human rights atrocities. All in all, the policy of promoting an extreme central government, the continuation of disregarding and undermining the socio-cultural aspects of the "subjected people", as well as the military dictatorship of the Derg invited for the proliferation of several ethno-regionalist liberation forces vying for independence, autonomy and recognition. The ethno-regionalist liberation forces interpreted every socio-economic and political issue in terms of ethnicity to achieve their political ends. They used it as a primordial instrument to mobilize their supporters in the armed struggle against the Derg order.

After the downfall of the Derg in 1991, the EPRDF seized power and endorsed a federal system by declaring ethnicity as a legitimate organizing political principle promising to bring unity-in-diversity, democracy and development; to resolve the age-old problems of the people (historical injustice); and striving to create a "New Ethiopia State". But all these fundamental factors for adopting a federal system have confronted by a lot of challenges from the outset and most of the challenges are the result of ethnicity, the brand of the EPRDF politics. Since 1991, ethnicity has become a potential threat to the people of Ethiopia because it contributed to the expansion of highly complicated and networked corruption and rent-seeking political economy; aggravated fierce competitions among ethnic groups for natural resources and ethno-regional boundaries; prevented the sentiment of national integration and cohesion; narrowed the political space for political pluralism and purged the genuine political contenders from the national politics. Consequently, the ethnic based political system of the EPRDF has confused the country and could not bring a significant economic development, political advancement and democratization process as its federal experiment revolved on the negative track-records of federalism. Above all, the making of ethnicity as a bone of the country's political system encourages the political elites to compete in controlling economic resources and political power using their superficial ethnic representation. They involve in an acute ethno-political competition, which makes them politically rigid, highly sensitive and confines their ability to carefully settle their contradiction through mutual tolerance, dialogue and the rule of law. They used ethnicity as a political instrument to seed ethnic sabotages, mistrusts and hatred to achieve their selfish interests at the expense of others. This negative use of ethnicity paves the stage for the rise of persistent political instabilities and violent conflicts in Ethiopia, one of the most conflict-ridden regions in the Horn of Africa.

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