

POLICY BRIEF

Title: Ethiopia's Federal Fault Lines: Beyond the Ethnic Paradigm

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1. Executive Summary

Ethiopia stands at a transformative yet precarious crossroads. The federal arrangement established under the 1995 Constitution was a bold attempt to rectify centuries of centralized marginalization by institutionalizing ethno-linguistic identity as the bedrock of the state's architecture. While this "State-Nations" model initially offered a sense of recognition to historically "suppressed groups", three decades of practice have exposed profound and systemic "fault lines." The current framework has inadvertently mutated from a tool of liberation into a mechanism of exclusion, transforming administrative boundaries into rigid ethnic frontiers and fostering a pervasive "minority-within-majority" dilemma. This policy brief argues that the prevailing fixation on a primordial, ethno-linguistic-based federalism—where territory is inextricably linked to bloodline—has reached a point of diminishing returns. The system now actively undermines national cohesion, stifles economic integration, and threatens the very durability of the state. To avert the looming risk of fragmentation, Ethiopia must courageously transition toward a "Hybrid Federalism." This proposed model seeks a sophisticated equilibrium: it preserves the vital recognition of cultural and linguistic rights while simultaneously enshrining a robust, residency-based national citizenship. By decoupling political sovereignty from ethnic exclusivity and strengthening non-ethnic institutional arbiters, Ethiopia can navigate its current dilemmas and forge a resilient, inclusive union that reflects the demographic and social realities of the 21st century.

2. Introduction: The Crisis of Institutionalized Identity

The Ethiopian federal experiment is undergoing an existential stress test. The 1991 transition was designed to move the country away from a "Nation-State" model, towards a "State-Nations" model that celebrated diversity. However, in the process of restructuring the governance system, the architects of the current system mapped sovereignty directly onto ethnicity. This created a political marketplace where the only currency of power is ethnic identity.

Today, this institutionalized identity has catalyzed a zero-sum political culture. The central crisis is not the concept of federalism—which remains the most viable option for a diverse polity like Ethiopia—but rather the logic of its current application. By prioritizing collective rights to the detriment of individual liberties, the system has established a hierarchy of citizenship. In many regions, the distinction between "indigenous" (titular) and "non-indigenous" (settler) populations has created a form of internal political "apartheid". The "fault lines" we witness today—inter-regional conflicts, violence, mass internal displacement, and the rise of regional paramilitaries—are not mere accidents; they are the logical conclusion of a framework that views land as an ethnic asset rather than a common national resource.

This brief provides a comprehensive analysis of these intricacies and outlines a logically coherent "way out" to prevent institutional collapse and foster national renewal and unity.

3. The Intricacies and Dilemmas of the Ethno-Linguistic Framework

A. The "Titular vs. Non-Titular" Citizenship Paradox

The current ethnic-based federal system has created a distinction between "indigenous" (titular) groups and "settlers" (non-titular). Thus, the most corrosive element of the federal structure is the concept of "ownership" over regional states. When a specific ethnic group is designated as the "titular"- owner of a region, all other residents—regardless of how many generations they have lived there—are relegated to the status of "permanent guests" or "settlers". This has led to:

- ☞ **Political Disenfranchisement:** Millions of Ethiopians living outside their "ancestral" ethnic territories are becoming second-class citizens, lost sense of belongingness, marginalized from socio-economic and political domains of their local administrations. Significant numbers of citizens are currently unable to join the civil service, run for office or, in some cases, even the right to be elected in local elections because they do not belong to the "indigenous" ethnic group of their residence.
- ☞ **Ethnic Cleansing and Displacement:** Because of the polarized ethnic politics mainly fueled by ethnic entrepreneurs' accompanied by weak institutional system for the protection of minorities, Ethiopia became the leading country in the world in Internal Displacement of Peoples (IDPs), particularly after 2019 (see also Semir, 2019) . In addition, contested administrative borders frequently lead to violent conflict, as ethnic elites utilize state machinery to "purify" their designated regions. As a result, several peoples such as ethnic Amharas are targeted for identity-based attacks and violence on the basis of "son of the soil" discriminatory measures at different times.
- ☞ **The "Minority-within-Majority" Trap:** In trying to protect the rights of large ethnic groups at the federal level, the system has created thousands of vulnerable "minorities" at the local level who lack constitutional protection against the regional majority (Tamirat, 2025).

3.2. The Boundary Adjudication Paradox

Traditionally, internal boundaries serve as tools for administrative efficiency; however, Ethiopia's ethno-linguistic federalism transforms them into markers of ethnic sovereignty. Internal administrative boundaries in Ethiopia are not merely administrative; they are markers of ethnic ownership. Because the constitution links land to identity, any boundary adjustment is viewed as an existential loss or gain. As a result, there is no single region immune from boundary conflicts with one or more of its neighboring region (s) (Adane et al., 2023). This has rendered the House of Federation (HoF) often incapable of resolving disputes without triggering further violence. The House of Federation (HoF), tasked with resolving identity and boundary issues, is composed of ethnic representatives. This often makes the HoF a site of political negotiation rather than a court of impartial constitutional adjudication. When the referee is also a player, the rules of the game lose their legitimacy.

3.3. Imbalances between “Self-Rule” and “Shared-Rule”

The emphasis on regional autonomy, without a corresponding emphasis on national integration, has weakened the federal government’s ability to act as a neutral arbiter. In its 3 decades of federalism experience, there is a clear imbalance between the ‘Self-Rule’ and “Shared-Rule’ pillar notions of federalism in Ethiopia. In other words, the tilt towards “Self-Rule” is a clear marker of Ethiopia’s ethno-linguistic federalism, which strongly affects the sense of overarching national identity and sub-national entities belongingness and commitment to the shared spirit and notion of the sovereign state. This "centrifugal" force encourages regional fragmentation rather than national unity.

4. Evidence-Based Analysis of the Fault Lines

4.1. The identity-based federal structure and contested jurisdictions: The establishment of regions primarily on identity and language as outlined under article 46 of the FDRE Constitution is the root causes of the current federal fault lines. The ethno-linguistic federal structure has created tensions, mistrust, conflict and violence, which in turn created “we” and “they” ethnic compartments among the multiethnic groups of the country which is not the case in the pre-1991 political regimes of Ethiopia. Though there were conflicts mainly over resources among pastoral and semi-pastoral communities before 1991, it was not as such ethnic-based and protracted. It would be solved with local elders without the active involvement of the central government. However, after 1991 this paradigm was shifted. Though there is no single homogeneous regional state, some ethnic group (s) consider themselves as a sole owner of a particular region and this is also further supported by the constitution of some regional states. As a result, identity-based conflicts and violence are rampant and protracted in unprecedented manner. Above all, disputes over “ownership” of a particular territory or fertile borderlands are a common facet of the federal system since 1991(Adane et al., 2023).

4.2. Linguistic Barriers: The use of a single "working language” in regions that effectively excludes “non-titular” residents from public services and the justice system is also another factor creating tensions and mistrust between ethnic groups which gradually deteriorates social cohesion and national unity.

4.3. The Secession Clause (Article 39): While intended as a safety valve, the unconditional right to self-determination, including secession, serves as a recurring tool for political blackmail by regional elites, destabilizing the long-term investment climate and state security.

5. Argumentative Framework: Why Reform is Mandatory

The status quo is unsustainable for three core reasons:

5.1. Demographic Reality: Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic state labeled as “a melting-pot of nations and nationalities” increasingly urbanized and mobile. Its people are like a mixed *teff* which literary means in Amharic “ሰርገኛ ጤፍ” which is difficult to separate the red from the white. A system based on static, rural ethnic enclaves cannot accommodate a youth population that is increasingly multi-ethnic and geographically mobile.

5.2. Economic Integration: Ethnic protectionism within regions hinders the free movement of labor and capital, creating internal "trade barriers" and investment that stifle national GDP growth.

5.3. Global Geopolitics: In a volatile Horn of Africa, a fragmented Ethiopia is a magnet for external interference. A cohesive, internally stable federal state is a prerequisite for national sovereignty (Tamirat, 2023).

6. The "Way Out": Strategic Recommendations for Reform

To navigate these dilemmas, the Ethiopian state and people must move toward a Symmetric and Civic-Oriented Federalism. So that, it is important to take the following pragmatic measures:

6.1. Constitutional Re-Engineering: From "Nations" to "Citizens"

- ☞ **Amending Article 8:** The Constitution should be amended to state that sovereignty resides in the Ethiopian People as a whole, acting through their federal and regional institutions, rather than in "Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples" as separate entities.
- ☞ **Residency-Based Franchising:** Explicitly legislate that any Ethiopian citizen residing in any part of the country for a defined period shall have full and equal rights to vote and run for any local or regional office, regardless of their ethnic background.
- ☞ **Decoupling Rights from Territory:** Amend the constitution to guarantee that citizenship rights—specifically the right to have political participation and representation irrespective of his/her identity, religion, and places of resident and so on. Thus, the right to reside everywhere on choice, popular suffrage (the right to elect and to be elected), own property, join into the civil-service and hold office—are based on residence and citizenship, not ethnic origin. To do this, a commitment from the government is crucial. It is also vital to establish a universal mechanism that ensures full political participation for any citizen regardless of their location within the federation.

6.2. Redefine the Federal Structure: It is paramount and inescapable to redefine the existing ethno-linguistic based federal structure towards a citizen-based and a hybrid-model federal system. This should be done in an all-inclusive and genuine national dialogue and reconciliations. This dialogue should consider principles beyond solely ethno-linguistic identity, incorporating factors such as shared geography, historical bonds, economic viability, administrative efficiency, and the psychological makeup of diverse communities. The objective should be to foster regions that are genuinely accommodative of diverse ethnic groups, moving away from a presumptive ethno-homogeneity.

6.3. Institutionalizing Multi-Lingualism and Cultural Autonomy

- ☞ **Non-Territorial Cultural Autonomy:** Shift the protection of linguistic and cultural rights to specialized "National Cultural Councils." These councils would have the power to manage schools and media in their specific languages, but their authority would follow the person, not the land. This allows a person to enjoy their cultural rights in any region of Ethiopia without needing that region to be "ethnically pure."
- ☞ **Symmetric vs. Asymmetric Powers:** Consider a model where highly diverse urban centers are granted a "Charter City" status, governed by civic principles, while rural heartlands maintain a degree of traditional federalism, provided they respect the residency rights of others.
- ☞ **Language Policy:** Transition from a single "working language" per region to a more flexible and context-based model in multi-ethnic regions, zones and woredas. It enhances sense of

belongingness and social cohesiveness of the diverse ethnic communities residing in region, zones and woredas characterized by ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity. It also bridges the communication gap between the state and the citizen.

6.4. Reforming the House of Federation (HoF)

- ☞ **The Senate Model:** Transform the HoF into a "Federal Senate" comprising both ethnic representatives and genuine merit-based experts (legal scholars, economists, and retired statesmen). This would ensure that decisions regarding boundary disputes are based on historical evidence, geographic logic, and economic viability rather than purely ethnic arithmetic.

6.5. Strengthening the National Glue

- ☞ **National Political Parties:** Encourage the formation of national, rather than ethnic-based, political parties through campaign finance reform and registration requirements. This measure incentivizes the formation of national parties that must meet membership thresholds across multiple regions to participate in federal elections.
- ☞ **Economic Corridors:** Invest in inter-regional infrastructure that forces economic interdependence, making the cost of conflict higher than the benefit of cooperation.
- ☞ **Enhancing Common National Symbols and Federal Working Languages:** To facilitate national integration, Ethiopia should forge common national symbols like the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam to enhance strong bondage and partnership among and between its diverse communities. It is also essential to formally adopt a multi-lingual federal policy. While Amharic remains a lingua franca, considering others such as Oromiffa, Tigrigna, Somali, and others to federal working languages will reduce the feeling of "linguistic marginalization" and foster a sense of national ownership among all groups.

7. Conclusion: Toward a New Social Contract

The current ethno-linguistic federalism was a necessary medicine in 1995 to treat the illness of hyper-centralization. However, any medicine, if taken in excess or for too long, becomes a poison. Ethiopia's "fault lines" are widening because the state continues to use a 20th-century map to navigate a 21st-century landscape. The way out is not a return to the unitary, oppressive past, nor is it the disintegration into ethnic fiefdoms. The way out is Evolution. We must build a federalism that is "smart" enough to protect the linguistic and cultural rights of all ethnic groups, while simultaneously protecting the Ethiopian's right to their country. By prioritizing residency-based citizenship and decoupling land from ethnicity and bloodline, Ethiopia can transform its diversity from a source of conflict into a source of competitive advantage. This is the intellectual and political challenge of our generation. To ignore it is to invite collapse; to embrace it is to secure a prosperous and integrated future for all.

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