ETHNICITY, DEMOCRATISATION AND DECENTRALIZATION IN ETHIOPIA: THE CASE OF OROMIA

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Abstract: The 20th century has been shaped by class and national struggles intended to end the asymmetrical relations that arose in the historical process of the creation of the multi-ethnic polity of Ethiopia. This study explores and assesses the democratization and decentralization experiment in Ethiopia. It focuses on the Oromia region, which is the country’s largest region as well as housing its single largest ethnic group. It describes the demand of the Oromo people for self-rule and democratic governance on the one hand, and the promises made on paper by the government in power, on the other. It concludes that the Oromia region is a classical case in terms of the degree of failure of the regime’s policies and the continued struggle for real autonomy and democracy on the part of the local population.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the historical continuum that informs the ‘making and remaking’ of modern Ethiopia, the second half of the 19th century was shaped by the wars of incorporation and state formation on unequal terms. In many major ways, class and national struggles, intended to end the asymmetrical relations, have shaped the second half of the 20th century. In other words, while the wars of the 19th century were for the ‘making’ of modern Ethiopia, the struggles of the 20th century were for the reversal of the same historical process that created the multi-ethnic polity of Ethiopia. To be more specific, the class and national/ethnic struggles of the 1960s and the 1970s that precipitated the revolution of 1974, the various struggles that led to the change of regime in 1991, and the ongoing struggles for self-rule and democracy are all part of the ‘remaking’ of Ethiopia.

A closer look at the nature of the perennial struggles for the ‘remaking’ of Ethiopia, clearly shows the centrality of the competing ethnic nationalists claims for an equitable share of power and resources under the command of the state (Merera 2002). A further observation also shows that in the same way the regional autonomy formula of the military regime, which was informed by and presented as a socialist project failed to address the competing claims, the present regime’s ethnic based federal set up, which is

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designed along a liberal democracy trajectory appears to be failing to produce the desired result. What is being implemented, as democratization and decentralization of power by the new regime to address the demands and claims of the country’s diverse communities seem to be leading to a dead-end. The central problem is the contradictory actions of the regime, its democratization and decentralization policy on paper and centralization in practice, which has failed to make a major departure from the country’s past autocratic/authoritarian political trajectory. Democratization and decentralization in the Oromia region, which is the focus of this study, is a classical case in point, both in terms of the degree of failure of the regime’s policies and the continued struggle for real autonomy and democracy on the part of the local population.

The focus of this study is the Oromia region, which is the country’s largest region that houses its single largest ethnic group. It explores and assesses the democratization and decentralization experiment in Ethiopia by weighing the demand of the Oromo people for self-rule and democratic governance on the one hand, and the promises made on paper by the government in power on the other. The central argument of this study is that the top-down approach of the ruling-party, which is inspired by its hegemonic aspirations, is seriously impeding the hoped for democratization process and the decentralization of power thereof both in the region and the rest of the country.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study is an empirical investigation of the direction and content of the democratization/decentralization initiative in Ethiopia since 1991. It has assessed the practical implementation of the host of policy initiatives of the new regime related to the democratization/decentralization drive. Furthermore, by looking at the emerging institutions of governance, the study has explored to what extent the decentralization policy has led to the empowerment of ordinary citizens by promoting meaningful political participation, which is a *sine qua non* for a transparent, accountable and democratic government.

The on-going Democratization/ decentralization experiment has also been assessed from defined goals; the quest for real autonomy and democracy by the country’s varied ethnic groupings and the response of the state to them.

The researcher made several field trips to several Woredas (districts) of the Oromia region for data collection. He held interviews with key informants as well as conducted focused group discussions in Ambo; Waliso; Gerar Jarso, North Shewa; Walenchiti, East Shewa; Dera, Arsi
Zone and Jimma. Additional data is collected from Borana, Bale and Harar through research assistants. The data collection also includes official reports and publications.

3. THEORETICAL DISCUSSION: THE LINKAGES BETWEEN DEMOCRATIZATION AND DECENTRALIZATION

With the end of the Cold War, which appears to have led to the historic opening that Huntington (1993) has characterized as ‘The third Wave of Democratization’, liberal democracy and the attendant free enterprise have become the ideological justification both for the legitimizing of the state by the regime in power and the social movements fighting to redefine the state. However, in spite of the subscription of the hegemonic forces controlling the state and the opposition to the ‘liberal political philosophy’, controversy often arises on the question of democratization and democracy, both at the theoretical and practical levels. The controversy is much more serious under situations of ethnically divided societies where political demands and their articulation easily take the ethnic fault-lines.

The controversy over theory arises as the result of competing interests, which leads to competing conceptions of democracy. The central issue in such controversy is whether individual rights or collective rights should be given primacy in the political restructuring of the state. The central question here is whether ethnic and/or cultural pluralism can serve as the bases for political pluralism. Academics, who have ventured to write on identity politics, are divided into three broad categories. Academics in the first group totally reject ethnicity as a basis of political organization of any democratic polity. Those in the second group support the accommodation of demands and claims of nationalities in one form or another in the constitutional engineering of a democratic polity. Those who belong to the third group take ethnicity as a ‘liberating ideology’ and ethnic-based political restructuring as a panacea for the present political quagmire found in much of Africa.

Ironically, in the arguments against ethnicity being the basis of democratic governance, there is a convergence between the liberal and leftist scholars. For instance, Keane (1995) and Fukuyama (1994) argue against ethnic nationalism as a basis of democratic transformation from the liberal standpoint, while Milazi (1996) and Mafeje (1999) strongly argue against ethnicity from the Marxist tradition. In this connection, Mafeje, who is one of the strongest opponents of rights based on ethnic collectivities, writes:
Political crisis in Africa has nothing to do with imagined, invented or real tribes or ethnic groups. It has to do with struggles among modern African elites for power at the national level. These are centered in the African capitals and not in the African hinterlands. The people in the hinterlands are only used as voting cattle or cannon fodder ... To achieve this; the various elites invoke primordial sentiments. Hence, the unwary can be deluded into thinking that the issue is 'tribalism' and 'ethnicity'. Properly understood 'tribalism' and 'ethnicity' are ideological ploys, stratagems, cunning culturally informed maneuvers so as to gain political advantage. This is an instance of the worst kind of political cynicism wherein the supposed leaders are prepared to sacrifice unsuspecting masses of people for their own immediate and mundane interests. (1999: 68).

In a dramatic contrast to Mafejie, Mohamed Salih (2001), who writes from a liberal perspective, sees in ethnicity the untapped potential, which if used, can help as path-breaking in addressing the emerging debate around the triple quest of Africa; ‘peace, democracy and development’.

Here, what is important to note from the outset is that, in the linkage between ethnicity and democracy, several thinkers advise the cautious approach – a middle road between total dismissal of ethnicity as an instrument of elite manipulation and the extolling of it as a panacea of all the ills of multi-ethnic polities. Nnoli (1995), Markakis (1996), Nabudere (1999) and Ghai (2000), among others, argue for a balanced approach to ethnicity and its use in the reordering of the state. Ghai (Ibid: 18) especially, underlines a need for ‘autonomy arrangements … negotiated in a democratic way’ to ensure the much needed democratic governance, political stability and meaningful economic development in multi-ethnic states. In an attempt to establish a linkage between democracy and real autonomy, he further notes that “Democratic structures are necessary for the exercise and protection of autonomy”, and that “Democratic politics in a region both compel regional leaders to protect autonomy, as well as empower them to do so” (Ibid: 22). In fact, the most serious pitfall in the Ethiopian democratization/decentralization process is the absence of ‘democratic politics’ in the on-going experiment.

To make sense out of the general debate on ethnicity and its linkage to democracy, arguably dismissing ethnicity as wholly evil appears to be counter-productive, while extolling it, as a panacea for the crisis of multi-ethnic societies may be a recipe for disaster. Credible evidence to both extremes are all around; evidently the major source of crisis of states in much of Africa is the attempt to suppress ethnic identities and the demands thereof by force, while the Ethiopian case is a good example of both. The Ethiopian novelty is recognizing ethnic rights to the full, even making them part of the constitution on the one hand, and using naked force to suppress the same demands on the other. Here, a point that should not be missed in
any intellectual venture to understand ethnicity is the paradox that surrounds identity politics. Ethnicity has got a propensity to lead to conflict when it is suppressed by the state and a propensity to lead to conflict in the event of democratizing the state and society. The latter creates a condition for claims and counter-claims, rising expectations and hegemonic aspirations, which in turn create a double pressure on the democratizing polity, (Merera 2002). Hence, the problem of democratizing and decentralizing the Ethiopian state partly emerges from such a paradox.

Yet another area of controversy is the rationale for decentralization and its linkage to democracy. Put differently, despite the existence of a general consensus among most scholars that decentralization means “devolution of power” to local level authorities or “sharing of power” with local authorities, serious discrepancies have continued to occur between theory and practice. The basic problem here is the contradiction that arises because of the hegemonic interest of the dominant forces that generally favor central control and the aspirations of the local population for real autonomy under a democratic government. The dominant forces propensity for central control generally leads to a situation Illy (1995: 10) calls ‘decentralization within centralization’, which in the final analysis is new forms of central control through the local agents. For better understanding of the inner workings of a given decentralization drive, Illy (1995:10-11) also suggests the criteria of assessment developed by Rondinelli, Nells and Cheema, which read in part:

1. The degree to which decentralization contributes to achieving broad political objectives, such as promoting political stability; mobilizing support and co-operation for national development policies; and providing heterogeneous regions, interests, and communities with a stake in the survival of the political system.

2. The degree to which decentralization increases administrative effectiveness, by promoting greater coordination among units of the national government and between them and sub national administrative units, local governments, and non-governmental organizations, or by encouraging closer co-operation among organizations to attain mutually acceptable development goals.

3. The degree to which decentralization contributes to promoting economic and managerial efficiency, by allowing government at both the central and local levels to achieve development goals in a more cost effective manner.

4. The degree to which decentralization increases government responsiveness to the needs and demands of various interest groups within society.
5. The degree to which decentralization contributes to greater self-determination and self-reliance among subordinate units of administration or non-government organizations in promoting development or meeting highly valued needs within society.

6. The appropriateness of the means by which policies and programs are designed and carried out to achieve the goals of decentralization, however they are defined.

These are the basics in standard literature on real decentralization of power and can be used as a checklist to assess the Ethiopian experiment. In this regard, Keller (2002), who writes in the Ethiopian context and shares some of the basics of Rondinelli’s group criteria, takes as a point of departure similar parameters to assess the emerging decentralization drive in Ethiopia.

In the emerging literature regarding the process of democratization and decentralization/federalism, there is a general agreement among Ethiopian scholars on the need to decentralize power in a manner that promotes efficiency, transparency, accountability and above all, popular participation in governance at all levels of the government structures. However, there is little or no unanimity regarding both the present state of affairs and the future direction of the experiment. For instance, Asmalash (1997) and Tegegne (1998) are cautiously optimistic; Meheret (1998) expresses serious doubts while Merera (2002) draws a gloomier picture of the democratization and decentralization drive under the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The focus of this paper is on drawing up the balance sheet of the Ethiopian experiment against the promises made in theory and the practice on the ground by taking the Oromia region.

4. THE HISTORICAL SETTING: THE GENESIS OF THE OROMO QUESTION

4.1 Modern State Formation in Ethiopia and the Incorporation of the Oromos on Unequal Terms

When the process of the creation of a modern multi-ethnic empire-state started by Tewodros around the 1850s, Ethiopia had been under feudal anarchy for over eighty years and central authority existed only in name (Getahun 1974; Bahru 1991; Teshale 1995). The dream of Tewodros was to unite Ethiopia by ending both feudal anarchy and the supremacy of the Oromo elite during the period. In fact, although the then dominant mobilizing factors were religion and region, Tewodros was the first modern Ethiopian ruler who explicitly recognized the ethnic factor in his project of empire building and consciously challenged the supremacy of the Oromo
princes over the Abyssinian kingdom. Thereafter, ethnicity was to become one of the key factors in the *modus operandi* of the Ethiopian State, although it remained as an undercurrent up to the 1960s.\(^2\)

After a brief period of Yohannes’ rule in 1872, a new power center emerged in Shewa under the leadership of Menelik. This new power center was destined to transform profoundly the history, geography and demography of the Ethiopian State by the turn of the 20\(^{th}\) century (Donham and James 1986; Bahru 1991; Teshale 1995).

Shewan expansion started in Shewa itself with the Oromo (Bahru 1991) and rapidly extended to the rest of the south. One kingdom after another, and one independent principality after another succumbed to the vast Shewan army. Outnumbered, out-gunned and mostly divided, some of the local people submitted peacefully while others put up heroic but futile resistance (Getahun 1974; Bahru 1991; Addis Hiwot 1975). Menelik's campaign successfully tripled the size of the empire and brought in no less than several dozen ethnic groups of diverse languages and cultures.

The core of the power elite of the emerging empire-state was the Shewa Amhara elite, who successfully incorporated and assimilated the Oromo elite of Shewa with its three-pronged ideology of Orthodox Christianity, Amhara cultural ethos and Ethiopian unity with Shewa as its center. Once the task of incorporating the Oromo elite of Shewa into the emerging politico-military structure was accomplished, the conquest of the other regions became far easier and the whole expansion took less than a quarter of a century. Access of the Shewan army to European firearms dramatically changed the balance of force and the role played by firearms appeared decisive, especially from the Oromo nationalists' perspective\(^3\) (Asafa 1993; Holcomb and Sisai 1990).

Outside of Shewa, Menelik and his generals extended the war of conquest to the west, east and south. Menelik won a decisive victory in 1882 at the battle of Embabo, in today’s Western Oromia. This opened western Oromo lands whose rulers submitted one after another with little or no resistance. Four years later, Arsi fell despite tenacious resistance by its population. The fall of Arsi allowed Menelik's army to march southeast to capture the eastern city-state of Harar at the battle of Chelenquo in 1887. The conquest of these regions gave Menelik access to real wealth - coffee and gold among other things – which significantly enhanced his political position and military might in the then emerging modern empire state of Ethiopia (Getahun 1974; Addis Hiwot 1975; Bahru 1991). For a century to come; the Shewan Amhara elite, the embodiment of Orthodox Christianity, the Amharic language and the Abyssinian cultural values, dominated multi-ethnic Ethiopia in a manner hitherto unprecedented in the country's history.
After the creation of the empire state was completed, the creation of 'one Ethiopian nation' continued under what was then termed Makinat (pacification). Makinat involved evangelization of the local population, institutionalization of a new system of political control, and imposition of a new political class, culture and language on the indigenous population such as the Oromo. As the result, new centers of political and military control, generally known as Ketemas or garrison towns mushroomed across the South.4

As part of the process, cultural subjugation was carried out through Amharisation, which accorded the Amhara culture pride of place as national culture and the Amharic language was the lingua franca of the Ethiopian state (Addis Hiwot 1975; Teshale 1995). The imposition of the Amharic language became increasingly critical over the years as it became the sole language of the court and administration and non-Amharic speakers such as the Oromos had to depend on interpreters. It also became the language to be learned at school and later the medium of instruction for students below the secondary level, which negatively affected the employment opportunities of non-Amharic speakers. The cumulative effect of all these measures was exacerbation of ethnic domination that left a permanent grievance in the memory of the subjugated peoples of the South where the bulk of the Oromo population lives, (Getahun 1974; Teshale 1995).

Here, one of the more enduring, repressive and damaging parts of the 'nation-building' measures was the imposition of a new type of political control in the newly conquered regions of the South (Getahun 1974; Holcomb and Sisai 1990; Asafa 1993). The conquest had been bloody and the fate of millions was left to the mercy of the conquerors. The subjugated peoples paid very dearly in land, produce and the corvée labor imposed on them. The land of the indigenous people was forcefully taken away and given to the military and quasi-military administrators and the soldiers under their command (Addis Hiwot 1975; Gebru 1996).

Furthermore, to grab the new opportunities created in Oromo areas and much of the South, the elite and the surplus population from the North flocked to these areas as administrators, court officials, soldiers, interpreters and priests. An alien system of rule known as a neftega (settlers) system of political, military and economic control through the intermediary of the gun was imposed on the southern peoples, (Markakis 1974; Teshale 1995). Notably, this was a vastly different system from that applied in the North, underscoring the North-South dichotomy in the country's political economy until 1974.

Seen in a comparative perspective, the Shewan expansion and its politico-economic consequences were far more brutal and devastating in the
South than in the North. In the North, it was the issue of re-unifying regions, which had been part of the Abyssinian polity for centuries, and peoples who shared the Christian tradition and Abyssinian cultural ethos for millennia (Getahun 1974; Markakis 1974; Addis Hiwot 1975; Teshale 1995). In the South, it was the issue of mostly bringing into the emerging empire-state new lands and new peoples on unequal terms. For the South, the outcome was a dual oppression: national as well as class. So here we have the North-South dichotomy: one polity but two markedly different systems.5

In this regard, Addis Hiwot presents the following picture:

After the creation of the multi-national empire-state by the Shewan feudal principality, especially after the conquest and the effective occupation and incorporation of the south, southwest and southeastern areas, a classical system of feudal serfdom was established. An extensive process of land confiscation and the enserfment of the indigenous peasants took place. The religious, cultural and linguistic differences between the feudal conquistadors and the process of enserfment gave a still more brutal dimension; the aspect of national and religious oppression accentuated the more fundamental aspect of class oppression. (1975: 30f)

As Addis Hiwot has correctly observed, oppression was very severe, and can be equated to ‘internal colonialism’, a term preferred by Oromo and Somali nationalists with the agenda of separation and adopted by several Oromo and non-Oromo academics (Donham and James 1986; Holcomb and Sisai 1990; Asafa 1993).

In a nutshell, Haile Sellasie, who emerged as a real successor to Menelik, despite his Oromo blood, continued the 'nation-building' process on a much more naked and narrow ethnocratic basis, which further deepened national inequality among the varied ethnic groupings of Ethiopia, which in turn later led to the rise of ethnic-based liberation movements (Teshale 1995; Gebru T. 1996).

4.2 The Rise of Modern Oromo Nationalism

By 1960 the imperial regime began to show visible signs of decay, which created a conducive condition for the forces of change to emerge. As Bahru (1991: 209) summed up the events of the day: “Opposition to the regime … had many facets. Peasants rebelled against increasing demands on their produce. Nationalities rose in arms for self-determination. Intellectuals struggled for their vision of a just and equitable order”. In the post-1960 period, the new challenges against the regime increasingly began to take the form of either class or national struggles. The Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) began championing the common class struggles against the imperial
regime, while the Eritrean and Oromo movements became the bearers of the national and/or regional struggles (Kiflu 1993).

Ethnic nationalism in the Ethiopian context was engendered, in a century of political, economic and socio-cultural domination of the Amhara elite over others (Getahun 1974; Addis Hiwot 1975). It was shaped by the collective action of the marginalized ethnic groups against political domination, land alienation and cultural suppression in 1960s and early 1970s (Gebru 1977; 1996; Asafa 1993). As the ESM also recognized the multi-faceted injustice perpetrated against the marginalized ethnic groups, the national and class struggles against the imperial regime reinforced each other. In fact, political mobilization along class and national lines, which were to become the dominant forms of struggle in the post-1960 period, were largely the logical outcome of national and class oppression - the bedrock of most injustices under the imperial regime (Addis Hiwot 1975; Markakis 1987).

In the case of the Oromo, the first Oromo-wide movement was the Matcha and Tulama Self-help Association. This organization, which is considered by many Oromos as the pioneer of modern Oromo nationalism has contributed immensely to the creation of self-awareness among the Oromo youth. The fermentation of modern Oromo nationalism began among the Oromo elite, who were increasingly aware of their secondary status in the imperial regime's military and civilian bureaucracy in the first years of the 1960s (Olana 1993; Merera 2002). Although their self-help association, the Matcha and Tulama, was quickly banned and its leaders either killed, imprisoned or deported to solitary confinement in remote areas, the idea lived on and later was taken up by Oromo students and the younger-generation intellectuals, who totally radicalized the Oromo question by elevating it to the level of the demand for the “right to self-determination”. In fact, it was at this point in time (1970 - 1974) that the ideology of the colonial thesis took shape among the Oromo elite [Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) Program 1976; Gadaa Melbaa 1980]. Consequently, the colonial thesis was destined to become the major underpinning of political mobilization for most of the Oromo elite to this date (Merera 2002). After Matcha and Tulama, the Bale Oromo resistance against land alienation and unbearable taxation served as an additional catalyst for the growth of Oromo nationalism (Gebru 1977, 1996). The two movements together have served as the genesis of modern Oromo nationalism.
4.3. Responses of the Imperial and Military Regimes to the Demand of the Oromos for Self-Rule

4.3.1 The Response of the Imperial Regime to Oromo Self-Assertion

By the mid-1960s, the Matcha and Tulama Self-help Association had begun to attract the Oromo elite of the day, which signaled to the imperial regime, both the possibility and the coming danger from Oromo nationalism. The Bale Oromo uprising had further raised the specter of an Oromo-wide armed movement that could be supported by the Somalia Republic against the imperial establishment. In fact, the Bale uprising was a more sustained struggle and had a reverberating effect among the radical Ethiopian students in general and the Oromo intelligentsia in particular (Kiflu 1993).

The response of the imperial regime to the emerging Oromo nationalism was both quick and brutal. The leaders of the Matcha and Tulama Self-help Association were herded to prison, where some died and others served long prison terms, while the guerrilla fighters of Bale were forced to be disbanded and their leaders negotiated for minor posts. But, despite the ability of the imperial regime to suppress both movements, the seeds of modern Oromo nationalism had already been sown, and a more radical demand for the right to self-determination was soon to galvanize the Oromo intelligentsia and youth in the 1970s, which partly contributed to the popular revolution of 1974.

4.3.2 'Garrison Socialism' and State Response to Ethnic Nationalism: The Regional Autonomy Formula

The Ethiopian military, with its own limitations as inheritor of imperial Ethiopia, wanted to transform the country without making a major break with the country's imperial past regarding the national question, which had been the main source of crisis of the Ethiopian State. Not surprisingly, when they assumed power in September 1974, Ethiopia's military elite had no well-thought-out political program of any kind, except the vague motto of 'Ethiopia Tikdam' (Ethiopia First). But they moved fast with the winds of the day, and began to flirt with the civilian lefts' political agenda of a socialist revolution. To this end, they immediately adopted socialism as the official ideology on 20 December 1974, both to capture the imagination of the revolutionary youth, who were to be sent to the countryside to organize the peasantry for the support of the unfolding revolution, and to compete with the civilian left for revolutionary leadership.

According to the then prescription of becoming a revolutionary and to improve its socialist credentials, the military committee nationalized many private business firms throughout the country. Then came the March 1975 Land Reform Proclamation, which addressed the main historical grievances
of the varied ethnic groups in much of the South such as the Oromo. The decree on religious equality and the separation of Church and state in Ethiopia was also part of the new regime's response to the religious/ethnic inequality perpetuated under the imperial regime (Kiflu 1993). However, a more programmatic and direct response to the rising demands of ethnic nationalisms came with the declaration of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) in April 1976. The regional autonomy formula was included in the NDR program as part of building socialism in Ethiopia. It reads:

The right to self-determination of all nationalities will be recognized and fully respected. No nationality will dominate another one since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism.

The unity of Ethiopia's nationalities will be based on their common struggle against feudalism, imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism and reactionary forces. This united struggle is based on the desire to construct new life and a new society based on equality, brotherhood and mutual respect. ... Given Ethiopia's existing situation, the problem of nationalities can be resolved if each nationality is accorded full right to self-government. This means that each nationality will have regional autonomy to decide on matters concerning its internal affairs. Within its environs, it has the right to determine the contents of its political, economic and social life, use its own language and elect its own leaders and administration to head its own organs.

This right of self-government of nationalities will be implemented in accordance with all democratic procedures and principles Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC April 1976).

On paper, the NDR Program was a radical proposal. However, after the departure of MEISON, which attracted a good part of the Oromo radical intelligentsia and was believed to be the main author of the NDR Program, ethnic nationalism began to be portrayed as the most serious threat to the revolution. Furthermore, ethnic and regional movements began to be castigated as counter-revolutionary forces and the government's propaganda machine moved against them to complement the war of annihilation unleashed by the regime to destroy them altogether. The Eritrean movements, the Tigrayan, Oromo and Western Somalia liberation fronts had to face the military regime's much enhanced war machine, lavishly equipped with Soviet Union military hardware (Dawit 1989).

The regional autonomy program was resurrected in the National Constitution of 1987, which provided a regional autonomy status, albeit, on paper, to some regions. Based on the new Constitution, the country's administrative structure was subdivided into 29 regions. Only a few of
these, i.e. Eritrea, Tigray, Asab and Dire-Dewa were accorded the autonomous status, and even for them it was a regional autonomy of a severely restricted sort (Asmalash 1997). Constitutionally, the country continued to be a unitary state and the Workers’ Party of Ethiopia (WPE) was the only legally recognized political party in the country. In fact, political malversation was evident in the elections that followed the declaration of the republic in 1987 in which mostly party members were 'appointed' to the national Shengo. In areas such as Eritrea, the military officers filled the quota of the region (Merera 1992). No less serious, in some areas, people were told to vote for party officials residing in Addis Ababa whose names they had never heard of or for people they had never seen. If anything, the regional autonomy formula of the military-turned-civilian elite fell considerably short of what the various forces demanded. The end result was yet another façade for soldiers’ rule (Asafa 1993). In conclusion, from day one Ethiopia's inept military elite applied what can be termed a military method to solve all the country's societal problems, including the demand for national equality and self-rule.

The change of regime in 1991 and the reordering of the Ethiopian State that followed it initially appeared to accommodate the Oromo people's interests as a whole. However, the hope was very short-lived indeed. Due to the OLF leadership's failure to sustain the mobilized Oromo masses and the Tigrayan elite's hegemonic aspiration as well as its arrogance emanating from its much-enhanced military machine, the hope of building an inclusive political structure quickly gave way to open confrontation and a new round of conflict.

5. THE POST-1991 EXPERIMENTS AND THE OROMO QUESTION

5.1 The Promises Made in the Early Years

The Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and its outer covering, the EPRDF assumed state power in May 1991 with promises: to create a nation-state of equals by ending ethnic domination and democratize the Ethiopian State and society by ending centuries of autocratic/authoritarian rule, (Merera 2002). It further promised to create peace and stability, which taken together was hoped to bring about quick economic development and prosperity for all citizens of the country.

In what appears to be a practical implementation of the promises made on paper, a conference to establish a transitional government was convened in July 1991, to which some two dozen political movements including four Oromo-based groups were invited.8 With the benefits of hindsight, the interest of the TPLF/EPRDF to invite the Oromo movements seemed to be
less for the genuine sharing of power and more for getting the much needed international legitimacy, as the Oromos constitute the single largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. Arguably, the Oromos were also highly needed both for neutralizing the multi-ethnic political organizations as well as the Amhara elite who were expected to pose a serious threat to the new regime. Whatever the real motive of the TPLF leaders, a charter for the transitional period, which openly proclaimed the “right to self determination, including secession” to the country’s diverse communities was approved and an 87-Seat Council of Representatives (COR) was formed to oversee the transitional process. The executive was elected out of the COR and it was also empowered to act as a law-making body for the transitional period. Although the seats of the independent Oromo movements were limited to seventeen, much less compared to the size of the Oromo people, an additional ten seats were given to the TPLF surrogate Oromo organization, the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO), which was created by the TPLF at the eve of its victory to penetrate the Oromo areas. Some ministerial posts were also given to the OLF, which was considered to be a junior partner in the TPLF/EPRDF dominated Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE).

Officially, in what was said to be a response to the nationalists’ demands for self-rule, a linguistic/ethnic-based fourteen administrative units (twelve regional states and two special regions of Addis Ababa and Harar) were formed in early 1992. In the new set up, the Oromo region stretches from south to north, east to west, across much of the Ethiopian landmass. Here, it is important to note that the OLF, the biggest Oromo organization of the time gave its blessings to the new political engineering by the TPLF leaders, including the controversial Charter, the composition of the TGE and the regionalization policy that followed, some of which later turned out to be a grave miscalculation on the part of the OLF leaders (Merera 2002).

The alliance between the victorious TPLF and the OLF could not last for long. What created a serious tension between the TPLF and the OLF, among others, was the contradictory aspirations of the two organizations, the former’s hegemonic aspiration to recreate Ethiopia around the centrality of the Tigrayan elite and the latter’s aspiration to share power comparable to the size of the Oromo people. The intoxication of the TPLF leaders by the impressive military victory they achieved in the battlefield left no room for political sobriety, while the rising tide of Oromo nationalism forced the OLF not to moderate its demands. Furthermore, the TPLF leaders thought they could easily destroy the OLF and control Oromo nationalism under the leadership of the OPDO. The OLF leadership on its part, appears to have calculated that it could easily mobilize the giant Oromo population against the Tigrayan minority. It seems the expectations of both have not
materialized to date. The TPLF leaders have weakened OLF, but they could not win the hearts of the Oromos through OPDO, whose leaders are considered dependent at best and ex-prisoners of war in the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) and TPLF hands at worst. Moreover, the OLF leaders could not live up to the challenge of the day because of their evident failure to give neither political nor capable military leadership.

As expected, the total rupture between the TPLF and OLF came a year later, after the signing of the Charter. The reasons were basically that the TPLF leaders desired to implement their original agenda of hegemony, on the one hand, and the miscalculation of the OLF leaders, who rather than buying time led their massive following to a premature military confrontation on the other. The political consequence of the confrontation, between the two has been the frustration of the hoped for share of power by the Oromo elite. Consequently, there is neither the democratization of the Ethiopian state nor local autonomy that could satisfy the Oromo people’s quest for self-rule, but ‘new authoritarianism’ (Ottaway 1995) or ‘tyranny of a minority’ under a guise of democracy (Merera 2002).

5.1.2 The Regionalization Policy and the 1992 Regional Election: The First Major Test for Real Autonomy

The period between July 1991 and the regional elections of June 1992 was a crucial year, both for the TPLF/EPRDF and the independent Oromo movements. The two-pronged strategy of the ruling-party was to consolidate its military victory through the infamous Peoples Democratic Organizations (PDOs) on the one hand, and to initiate policies it hoped could capture the hearts of the hitherto marginalized ethnic groups. The Charter, which marked the takeoff for the two-pronged strategy in its preamble, states that:

WHEREAS the overthrow of the military dictatorship that has ruled Ethiopia for seventeen years presents a historical moment, providing the Peoples of Ethiopia with the opportunity to rebuild the country and restructure the state democratically;  

WHEREAS the military dictatorship was, in essence, a continuation of the previous regimes and its demise marks the end of an era of subjugation and oppression thus starting a new chapter in Ethiopian history in which freedom, equal rights and self-determination of all the peoples shall be the governing principles of political, economic and social life and thereby contributing to the welfare of the Ethiopian Peoples and rescuing them from centuries of subjugation and backwardness;
WHEREAS peace and stability, as essential conditions of development, require the end of all hostilities, the healing of wounds caused by conflicts and the establishments and maintenance of good neighborliness and cooperation;

WHEREAS for the fulfillment of the aforementioned conditions and for the reign of a just peace, the proclamation of a democratic order is a categorical imperative, and;

WHEREAS to this end, all institutions of representation installed by the previous regimes shall be dismantled, regional prejudices redressed and the rights and interests of the deprived citizens safeguarded by a democratic government elected by and accountable to the people;

WHEREAS from the peace loving and democratic forces present in the Ethiopian society and having varied views, having met in a Conference convened from July 1-5 in Addis Ababa, have discussed and approved the charter laying down the rules governing The Transitional Government as well as setting down the principles for the transitional period … (TGE 1991: 15-16)

To make the new beginning appear real, various policy initiatives, such as distribution of the council seats and ministerial posts to dozens of political groups, the linguistic/ethic-based regionalization policy, promotion of the oromiffa language as a working language in the Oromo areas and allocation of television and radio programmes to it were taken.

Benefiting from the Charter that guaranteed both the right to free organization and ‘the right to self-determination, including the right to secede’, the independent Oromo movements, especially the OLF moved fast to mobilize millions, which led to the general awakening among the Oromos, (Merera 2002: 176-79). Several factors have contributed to the leap forward in the otherwise slow growth of modern Oromo nationalism and mass mobilization. First, following the change of regime in 1991, several Oromo movements - the OLF, the IFLO, the UOPLF and the Oromo Abo opened offices throughout the Oromo areas. They openly incited the Oromo people to rise against the historical injustices done to them by the successive Ethiopian regimes and to lay claim to the gains to be made from the transition process. Especially the OLF, the largest of all - by briefly overcoming its chronic weakness at mass mobilization - openly told the Oromos, ‘independent Oromia is at your door and it is time to rise and salute it’.

As the disintegrated Ethiopian army, for the most part consisting of Oromos, joined the ranks of the OLF, there seemed to be sufficient military muscle to support the OLF demand. Moreover, the OLF activists used Ethiopian radio and television, which began broadcasting in Oromiffa for the first time, to reach the mass of Oromo people, in addition to public meetings.
The second major factor was the redrawing of the Ethiopian map on the basis of the ethnic/linguistic criteria. The Oromo region, which stretches across Ethiopia began to loom large in relation to a much smaller Tigray in the north and other regions adjacent to it. The Oromo nationalists' map even includes parts of the Tigrayan region - the Rayya-Azabo areas. The relative richness of the Oromo area as well as the population size of the Oromo people gave added importance and real assets, which the Oromo elite used in their mass mobilization drive.

The third major external factor was the triumph of the Eritrean and Tigrayan nationalists. Especially, the independence of the former has had a reverberating effect both on the rising tide of Oromo nationalism as well as on the elite aspiring to lead it. In fact, the success of Eritrea and Tigray - the Oromo population is, at least, more than six times larger than each of them - has created a rising expectation among the Oromo people and its elite, a temptation very difficult to resist. The birth of independent states such as Ukraine on the ruins of the disintegrated Soviet Union and other countries of Eastern Europe have further heightened expectations among the Oromo elite fighting for an independent Oromia republic.

The universal awakening of the Oromos immediately led to two things: the frustration and impatience of the TPLF leaders, who hoped to easily tame and control Oromo nationalism through the OPDO, which has never been anywhere near to capturing Oromo nationalism, and the OLF leaders, who were overwhelmed by the rising tide of Oromo nationalism and had no strong structure in place to control and lead it towards the desired goals. Consequently, confrontation between the TPLF- dominated TGE and the OLF almost led the country to the brink of yet another civil war. The mediation of the Eritreans, who were then more supportive of the TPLF designs and the donors did help very little to avert the looming confrontation. The 1992 regional elections further hastened the looming confrontation.

Following the proclamation of the regionalization policy of 1992, which was based on Article Thirteen of the Charter, the elections of the regional and local councils were scheduled for June 1992. To ensure the fairness of the process, a large contingent of international observers were invited and allowed to be stationed wherever they wanted to be. However, the much-publicized elections, the first acid test for the TPLF sponsored democratization, were doomed to fail from the beginning. First, all of the multi-ethnic political groups, which had long years of experience were ruled out of the game from the start. Secondly, the newly created major political groups, such as Southern Ethiopian Peoples’ Democratic Union (SEPDU), All Amhara People’s Organization (AAPO) were maneuvered out. Thirdly, and more importantly, the thin rope that tied the OLF to the
TPLF-dominated TGE broke as distrust and mutual suspicion reached their climax. Consequently, the OLF, which was the major contender of power, was forced to withdraw from contesting the elections and subsequently from the T.G.E. itself. This made the elections totally an EPRDF affair (NDI/AAI Report 1992).

What happened was that the TPLF, whose central objective was to consolidate power, had become less worried about the international legitimacy than in 1991, thought it was time to cut the OLF down to size, while the OLF thought losing the elections in an unfair political game was a costly political venture in the eyes of its supporters. In other words, the stake was too high for both actors. For the former, it was the question of handing over the Oromo region, which is the country’s largest administrative unit that houses its single largest population, and above all, its storehouse in terms of resources. For the latter, to accept willingly the dominance of a minority over Oromo areas is to commit political suicide. At any rate, the forced withdrawal of the OLF and the other independent Oromo and non-Oromo organizations in the 1992 elections had the effect of heralding a death blow both to the democratization of the Ethiopian state and the decentralization of policy thereof. What has emerged is a one-party rule.

The forcing out of the OLF from the legal political process and the continued foundering of the Ethiopian democratization, have led the Oromos to a new type of political and economic marginalization. The OPDO, true to its creation by the TPLF itself, could not move beyond the structural limits and opportunities given to it by its creators, and hence has become an instrument of indirect rule, a classic case of controlling the fate and resources of other peoples. As the OPDO appears to lack both the legitimacy to represent the Oromo people and the educational skill to run a transparent and accountable administration, there are a lot of compounded problems in the Oromo areas. As a result, human rights violations have been high, elections were seriously flawed, and economic development seems to be lagging in Oromo areas, in light of their potential for development and contribution to the national treasury.

Yet another serious problem in the Oromo areas is the drought, which formerly mostly affected the northern parts of the country. Most areas, which used to be affluent in the Oromo region, have now become prone to drought. The central government seems to be slow to respond and, when it responds, applies a political criterion in the distribution of national and international aid. Like the supply of fertilizers, food aid to the needy has been politicized and there are alarming reports in the independent press that peasants known to have supported the opposition or voted for the opposition have become targets of the angry government cadres who are...
obstructing external food aid to the hungry. The health-care system seems to be deteriorating in the Oromo areas, as elsewhere. Two years ago many Oromo peasants lost their lives to malaria within a few kilometers of Addis Ababa at a point in time when the country's Minister of Health was himself an Oromo, which has further exposed the OPDO officials disregard, if not powerlessness, to promote the interest of the very people they claim to represent.

After the local and regional elections of June 1992, several national and regional elections were held in 1994, 1995, 2000 and 2001. The 1994 elections were for a Constituent Assembly, whose role was limited to the rubber-stamping of the TPLF authored National Constitution. The 1995 elections were to bring to a close the long-delayed transition period and to manufacture public support and legitimacy for the new regime through “popular” elections as promised in the 1991 Charter. The 2000 national and regional elections and the local elections that followed in 2001 were all aimed at further consolidation of power by the TPLF/EPRDF.

As judged by both Ethiopian as well as non-Ethiopian scholars, and above all in the eyes of the wider Ethiopian public, all the elections were neither ‘free nor fair’ (Vestal 1999; Harbeson 1998; Pausewang, et al 2002; Merera 2002). In a nutshell, the elections which were aimed at enhancing both the democratic credentials of the new regime and its legitimacy in the eyes of the varied ethnic groupings of the country and the international community have had the opposite effect. This can be fairly summed up in the following words of a team of foreign scholars:

The problem does not lie in the constitution, or in the legal system. It lies in the political party structure. As long as the parties have no independent material base, the political interests have no independent means of expression. When all resources and means of communication, control, administration, distribution and taxation are in the hands of the ruling party through the government, there is little room for free and fair competition. When ethnic rather than political differences divide the population, and manipulation, intimidation and repression at the local level cannot be adequately corrected, there is meager hope of change, and hence no chance of accountability as between leaders and the people within a peaceful structure. (Pausewang, et al 2002: 241)

Keller (2002:46) also draws the same conclusion regarding the democratization/decentralization political gimmicks in Ethiopia:

In reality, what is billed as a 'unique form of ethnic federalism' in Ethiopia operates very much like a centralized, unitary state, with most power residing at the center. While official rhetoric proclaims that ethnic communities are now characterized by limited autonomous decision-making below the regional
state level and a great deal of central control and orchestration. As a consequence, while some institutional forms associated with consolidated democracies, such as political parties and periodic elections with universal suffrage may exist, this is more of a 'pseudo-democracy' (Diamond 1997) than anything else.

The institutionalization of a ‘new authoritarianism’ has had the effect of low intensity conflict and acute economic crisis, which have been further worsened by occasional droughts and famines as a result of which about a quarter of the country’s population is forced to survive on foreign handouts. Contrary to the expectation of the new regime, there is neither stability nor prosperity. Hence, the struggle for real autonomy and democratic rule has continued both in the Oromo areas and in much of the country. The Ethio-Eritrean war and the subsequent split within the TPLF have had a debilitating effect on the ruling party’s capacity to rule as a result of which, it is now in the state of soul-searching to make another new turn to hang on to power by any means necessary.

6. THE MAJOR PITFALLS IN THE DEMOCRATIZATION /DECENTRALIZATION EXPERIMENT AND THE OROMO PEOPLE’S QUEST FOR SELF-RULE

Theoretically, the fundamentals in any democratization process are: free and fair elections, respect for the rule of law that guarantees civil liberties of citizens and the building of democratic institutions. Whereas true decentralization involves local autonomy in the decision-making processes in a manner that citizens can influence public policies that affect their daily life. As partly demonstrated in our discussion of the theoretical part, popular participation and empowerment of the citizenry are crucial aspects both in the democratization and decentralization enterprises. This implies the creation of a legitimate, responsive and accountable government to the electorate at the national and local levels. In the Ethiopian context, it would also mean accommodation of legitimate claims of ethnic groups for local autonomy and self-rule.

At the level of theory, the National Constitution and the various policy initiatives by the present regime do not have much contradiction with the internationally accepted standards. In fact, some of the policies, such as Article 39 of the National Constitution, extravagantly bestow even the ‘right to secede to nations, nationalities and peoples’ of Ethiopia. However, as the experiment in the Oromo region and elsewhere in the country amply demonstrate there are several pitfalls at several levels of governance.

Firstly, both the content of the ground rules for the Ethiopian democratization and the decentralization initiatives have not been
negotiated, either among the organized forces or the respective communities they claim to represent. In the Oromo case, except for the short-lived negotiation and understanding between the OLF and the TPLF, the policies have been manufactured by the ruling party and imposed on the local population in the interest of the ruling-party. For instance, the Charter of 1991, the Regionalization Policy of 1992, the National Constitution of 1994 and the various policy initiatives were all authored by the ruling-party that lacks a popular mandate in the eyes of the Oromo people. Put differently, the TPLF leaders in their lust for power and hegemony have transplanted the basic tenets of the political program of their own organization to the Charter, later to the National Constitution and much of the government policies thereof. Here, suffice it to look at the constitutions of the so-called regional states, such as Oromia, which are wholly replicas of the National Constitution, which itself is informed by and the extension of the TPLF/EPRDF political program. (Compare the EPRDF Program, 1991; National Constitution, 1994; Constitution of Oromia Regional State 1995).

Secondly, the policy-making process of the regime is based on democratic centralism, a central element in Marxist-Leninist praxis. In what appears to be decentralization on paper and centralization in practice, key policy decisions are made at the center and transmitted to the locals as directives for implementation. In the Oromo case, the OPDO has been the transmission belt for decisions made at the center. Many studies done on the Oromo areas for the last twelve years, interviews and observations made by myself in several field trips confirm the existence of such a reality. Now, it is an open secret that the authority of the local officials is drawn from the center and loyalty to the center is far more important to them than public service to the local population. In fact, according to the interviews conducted in several Woredas, the OPDO officials are seen by the local population as paid agents in service of a repressive central government and unresponsive to local demands and needs. They are considered more as enemies to be feared than representatives fighting for the interests and aspirations of the people.

Thirdly, the emerging ‘democratic’ institutions that are supposed to serve both the institutionalization of democracy and decentralization of power themselves are not outcomes of popular elections. The regional and local councils were not products of popular elections and neither the National and regional constitutions were approved by genuinely elected representatives of the population. Far worse, the one-party dominated national parliament, whose role is to rubber-stamp the policies cooked by the executive branch, is not a product of free and fair elections. Nor is the judiciary independent, yet its role is supposed to be central both in the maintenance of the checks and balances of modern representative
governments and the rule of law. In the Oromo Woredas I visited, the court system is seen as an appendage of the administration that fulfils the wishes of the cadres. Interventions in the decisions of the court and extra-judicial detentions are common occurrences, while there are known cases of extra-judicial killings. [Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) Report, 2000b]

Fourthly, public services are neither seen as the right of the taxpayers nor are they locally initiated. According to the interviews made by the author and several empirical studies, public services are hopelessly deteriorating, there are few visible productive development activities and the local population have got little say in them, (Meheret 1998, 2001, Merera 2002). Contrary to the philosophy of decentralization, the rulers always tell the people, ‘this is what your democratically elected government thinks good for you and you should implement them’. Evidently, the local officials are known by the people for their notoriety as tax collectors than as representatives working for the provision of public services to them. According to many informants, even the Development Agents, who are supposed to advise people on the use of extension services are said to be more active in the collection of taxes than advising the peasants on development programs. The resultant effect is killing the local initiatives at best, and totally negating the democratization/decentralization drive at worst, which has remained much of a paper value to date.

Fifthly, there is an elaborate system of control imposed from above on each Kebele Association. The administrative structure, the cadre structure, the militia and the elders, who are paid to work as opinion-makers, are all part of the same system of control, coordinated by the administrator. The role of this last government unit is, therefore, to maintain law and order, watch the movements of the opposition groups, and above all, collect taxes. As such in the eyes of the local population, the system is more of an extension of the higher administrative echelons of the government and act as local agents of the state known for its political manipulation and repression.

Sixthly, the most serious pitfall in the scheme of things in the Ethiopian democratization/decentralization enterprise is the unresponsiveness of the state and local authorities to the complaints of the local population. Oromo peasants I talked to were complaining about the ever-increasing taxation and debt of fertilizers as well as many other problems; such as unfair distribution of food aid, harassment by local cadres, the rising cost of living, etc. Furthermore, peasants are bewildered by why government officials do not want to listen to their complaints and that they are always forced to pay taxation by selling their cattle even when nature fails them. To add insult to injury, according to many informants, there are also several extra-legal
taxation systems for sport, Red Cross, contribution to the OPDO and its women committees. These taxes are collected very often alongside land tax and no legal receipt is given for the payments made. In a nutshell, across the board Oromo peasants are raising problems related to their livelihoods; such as supply of fertilizers and other agricultural inputs, water supply, education and health services, a solution to the rising cost of living and intimidation by government cadres.

Finally, the Ethiopian democratization/decentralization initiative is claimed to be, above all else, a response of the new regime to solve the country’s chronic problem of ethnic inequality and the conflicts thereof. Despite the daily rhetoric about the liberation of the hitherto marginalized ethnic groups and their empowerment, in reality there is little departure from the country’s past political trajectory. Coupled with the rising expectations following the creation of an Oromia state, most Oromos are equally resentful of the current state of affairs (See Leenco 1999; Merera 2002). The OPDO, which has been playing, in the eyes of many Oromos, the role of a devil neither has had an independent existence of its own nor could become a useful intermediary between the government and the governed. Most of its cadres, as local operatives of the unpopular government, are cursed by the very people they claim to represent and generally tend to be corrupt. They are often dishonored and damned through the ruling party’s notoriously known public evaluation instrument, (Merera 2002). As a result, according to informants, the average turnover of local officials have been between five and seven in the last twelve years, which makes them live under constant fear of dismissal. In this connection, as an interviewee in Ambo area cynically put it, “the cadres enter the government’s bad book and are put under surveillance for subsequent dismissal the moment they start to work for the interest of the local people”. What such cynics indicate is that loyalty to the ruling-party is far more important than service to the people and that the interest of the ruling-party has very little to do with the interest of the local Oromo populace.

The most glaring inequity is the distribution of the national resources among the regions. The available official data for the period 1993/94 - 1999/2000 clearly demonstrates the uneven distribution of national resources (Merera 2002: 176 - 180). For instance, the Oromo and the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' regions, which above all else are known for their production of coffee, which contributes more than 60% to the country's foreign exchange earnings, get a clearly visible disproportionate share in return from the national treasury. According to the data of the period, the Tigray region's per capita share of the federal subsidy is consistently higher than Oromia, Amhara and SNNP regions, which constitute more than 80% of the country's population. The same is true for
capital expenditure per capita as well as foreign loan and aid per capita. Furthermore, the Somali region, whose population is greater than Tigray, was getting proportionally far less than Tigray until 1998 when it joined the favored regions club, which makes the percentage of the disfavored population more than 86% of the country's population prior to 1998. In fact, the capital expenditure per capita for Tigray is about three times greater than Oromia. A more glaring discrepancy that can be inferred from the data of the period is the Oromia region, which is known for being a storehouse of Ethiopia's wealth, disproportionately receives the least from the national treasury (Merera 2002: 176-79).

To sum up, as demonstrated in the practice of the Oromia region, the top-down approach of the Ethiopian democratization and decentralization initiative appear not to be working. The hegemonic aspiration of the sponsors of the process has obstructed every genuine movement forward. What the sponsors want is to institutionalize the hegemonic control of the ruling-party under the guise of democracy and decentralization, while what genuine democratization and decentralization require is real sharing of power between the center and the local authorities and empowerment of the ordinary citizenry. The meaningful sharing of power and empowerment of citizens can only be done under popularly elected accountable governments at the central, regional and local levels. Any smart political manipulation by the powers that be cannot replace real institutionalization of democratic governance and genuine decentralization.

As the preceding discussion amply demonstrates, the OPDO has been facing double failure, a failure to properly serve its creators as well as a failure to capture the imagination of the Oromo people as the bearer of their aspiration for self-rule. Far worse, what it has achieved to date is turning against the very people it claims to represent. Sadly, the region has turned into “a big prison”, where citizens live in fear and frustration. Consequently, the popular struggles for real autonomy, self-rule and democracy have continued across Oromia by the independent Oromo movements like the OLF, Oromo National Congress and the Matcha and Tulama Association.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As seen in the theoretical part, the two key issues in democratization and decentralization enterprises are: the equitable distribution of power and resources, while negotiating competing claims and interests. In the Ethiopian context, both the question of the equitable distribution of power and resources, especially, those under the command of the state has been central in the struggles for democracy and social justice in much of the second-half of the twentieth century. Put differently, the hallmark of
competing ethnic nationalisms in the country has been the struggle for power and resources under the control of the state—where land used to be a central element during the days of the imperial regime.

The Oromos have been fighting since the 1960s under the banner of national and class struggles both to end their inequality in the share of power and land alienation, which condemned the bulk of the Oromo population to wallow under classical serfdom. Although the land question was addressed by the military regime in many major ways, the dilemma of successive regimes to fully solve the Oromo question in the manner that is acceptable to the bulk of the Oromo population could not materialize. The central issue here is that what has been at stake is the share of power with the country’s largest ethnic group, a share of power that cannot be satisfied with some handouts in terms of rights by a minority-controlled government. In this connection, it is important to note that, the imperial regime tried to solve the Oromo dilemma by the policy of “nation-building” and the cultural assimilation thereof, where the Amharic language and Orthodox Christianity were made to play a critical role in the process. The military regime did take some substantive measures in the right direction especially through the land nationalization decree, but its regional autonomy project under ‘barrack socialism’ could not meet the rising expectations on the part of the Oromos regarding the sharing of power. Likewise, the cosmetic changes introduced by the present regime under the guise of democracy and decentralization of power have failed to meet the Oromo people’s quest for real self-rule and democracy. As a result of the top-down approach and the authoritarian actions of the incumbent regime, the hoped for democratization/decentralization drive is foundering.

The most serious pitfall in decentralization/decentralization initiative is that the power holders from minorities are trying to solve the problem of the majority’s share of power at the terms as well as in the interest of the minority in power not at the terms and interest of the majority. What should be underlined in this regard is that as can be seen from the lessons of the past and the present political impasse, marginalizing a majority and hoping to democratize/decentralize at the same time is a contradiction. Furthermore, anybody who knows Ethiopia well, cannot fail to reach the inescapable conclusion that both the fate of democracy and the fate of country as a united polity largely depend upon the manner in which the Oromo question is solved. Needless to add, both call for a fairer share of power among the country’s diverse communities in a manner that ensures a real decentralization of governance and empowerment of ordinary citizens.

In conclusion, what should be emphasized in light of the preceding discussion is the urgent need for rethinking by the contending forces. First, it is high time that the country’s divided opposition starts to rethink about
its alternative policies and actions. Accepting unity in diversity, which would enable it to devise a common agenda for the democratization of the Ethiopian state, needs to be followed more honestly and aggressively. This would help it to overcome its chronic problem of fragmentation and frustrate the divide and rule policy of the ruling-party. In turn, this would help it galvanize public support at home and international solidarity abroad so as to exert enough pressure on the government to open up the political space as well as be responsive to the legitimate demands of citizens. If the country is to be pulled out of the present political quagmire, the ruling-party, on its part, should have political will to rethink its contradictory tendencies of propagating democratic principles on paper and adherence to authoritarian actions in practice. This has already proved to be a disastrous political game both for itself and the country at large. Cases in point are the split within the ruling-party, the failure to meet the imperatives of meaningful economic development as well as the continued ethnic conflicts across the country. These are all the consequences of dictatorial policies of the regime. Hence, it is time that the ruling-party understands and takes seriously the linkages between stability, democratic governance and meaningful economic development and work towards their realization.

Endnotes

1. Ethiopia with its existing boundaries took its present shape in the last quarter of the 19th century in the process of the expansion of the Ethiopian State.

2. Most of the current political problems of Ethiopia took root in the process of the creation of the modern empire-state in the last quarter of the 19th century. For instance, highland Eritrea was detached from Tigray and became an Italian colony from 1890 to 1896 when Menelik abandoned it to the Italians. The Tigrayan elite began to feel dominated when they were reduced to second-class status following the death of Yohannes in 1889 while a larger part of the Oromo and the rest of the southern peoples population were brought under the Ethiopian state during this period on unequal terms. Hence, the current political crisis in the country is linked to these events of the 19th century in one way or another.

3. The introduction of the firearms into Shewa in abundance decisively shifted the balance of force in favor of the conquering army of Menelik. In fact, the resistance of most of the indigenous peoples of the South became futile mainly because of the superior firearms employed by Menelik’s invading army.

4. Most of the old southern Ethiopian towns were products of the garrison settlements created for political as well as military control of the various parts
of the South. They soon developed both as administrative and commercial centers of the respective areas.

5. Many observers of Ethiopian politics make a distinction between North and South Ethiopia in many major respects: the political institutions, the landownership system and other instruments of oppression. See for instance, Markakis (1974) and Addis Hiwot (1975), the extent to which the people of the South suffered dual oppression - markedly different from the North.

6. This conference was the first time that Oromo organizations negotiated and participated in formation of Ethiopian government in the name of Oromos. For the OLF version of the story, see Leenco Lata (1998; 1999).


8. According to many observers of Ethiopian politics, the OPDO was created out of the ex-prisoners of war in the hands of both TPLF and EPLF. (See Young 1997: 166; S. Pausewang et al 2002: 14; Leenco 1999).


11. The Oromo National Congress (ONC) was created in 1996 as a response to the crisis of Oromo nationalism under the leadership of the OLF on the one hand and the TPLF-created OPDO on the other. It emerged as a third line in the Oromo movement by rejecting both secession from or submission to the Tigrayan elite-dominated regime as real alternatives.

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