

David Turton (ed.), *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective* (Eastern African Studies, James Currey, Ohio University Press and Addis Ababa University Press 2006, 246 pages)

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As young as it is, the Ethiopian federalism needs the lessons of every theory and practice of federalism to become a mature and successful federal system. The failure/success of Ethiopian federalism, as anybody could guess, will have significant implications on this part of Africa, not to mention its effects on 'nations, nationalities, and peoples' inhabiting the country. That is why more and more works on federalism are called for specifically identifying challenges and opportunities of other federations, which could lend theoretical and practical lessons to learn for Ethiopian federalism. From this, one could easily see the immense value this book would have to the ongoing debate on Ethiopian federalism. From the West to Africa and Asia, several lessons are delivered in the book. An anthology in which ten writers have taken part, the book discusses the notion of federalism from the perspectives of constitutional law, politics, linguistics, anthropology, and peace studies.

In the introductory part of the book (pp. 1-31), the editor David Turton sets out the aims and assumptions of the contributions found in the book and relates arguments made by the contributors. In the words of the editor, the aim of the introductory part is to "summarize and draw connections between the main arguments and conclusions of the contributors ..." It is an excellent introduction which provides the reader with a concise account of the main arguments, issues, and challenges of multination federalism that one could only find after reading all the nine subsequent parts of the material. Turton also adds his own reflections on several issues of concern to multination federalism. Unlike older federations in the West, which he claims, were mostly designed for 'administrative convenience and bureaucratic efficiency', Turton traces Ethiopian federalism to the model of federalism developed by Lenin, a model aimed at providing 'a degree of autonomy and self-determination' to minorities. For the benefit of those

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proponents of Ethiopian federalism who wish to distance themselves from the failed multination federalisms of USSR and Yugoslavia, he assures them of the inevitability of federalism to Ethiopia and the increasing acceptance of multination federalism in Western liberal democracies.

Upon the admission of the editor, the book is an outcome of a seminar 'Ethnic Federalism: the Challenges for Ethiopia' held in 2004. The aim of the seminar was to initiate comparisons between Ethiopian federalism with other federations and to see the contributions of Ethiopian federalism towards "federalism as a political concept and as a means of accommodating ethnic diversity". A subsidiary aim of the seminar was also to give attention to the impact of the federal system on the lives of 'ordinary' Ethiopians.

Turton forwards three assumptions made to achieve the aims of the seminar. One assumption is that there is no alternative to federalism to Ethiopia. Obviously one finds it hard to contest this assumption, which is also shared by main stream politics which is the principal forum for public debate on federalism. And two, compared to the past, the restructuring of Ethiopia as an ethnic federation has been an 'undeniable success', preventing 'violent dismemberment', maintaining peace and security, and laying a legal foundation for democracy. The third assumption, which might have inspired the seminar and thereby the contributions in the book, is that, in light of the criteria for genuine federalism, challenges to Ethiopian federalism remain ahead. Although not everybody agrees with these assumptions, they were shared by all the contributors. Common understanding of the assumptions might have helped the debate, by limiting the scope of inquiry. Intentional or not, the assumptions do not rule out other forms of federations such as functional federations to Ethiopia. If that is so, the book could have been enriched had arguments, if any, for functional or other similar forms of federations been made part of the collection.

Multination federalism has become a trend followed by multination states (in contrast to *nation* states) as a mechanism to satisfy interests of minorities. This is what Will Kymlicka tells us in his contribution dealing

with the relevance of the West's experience of multination federalism to Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular (Will Kymlicka, *Emerging Western Models of Multination Federalism: Are They Relevant for Africa?* pp. 32-64). Having outlined the move towards multination federalism, Kymlicka forwards factors that led to the acceptance of multination federalism in the West. Some of them have to do with the human rights revolution that proclaimed the equality of all nations, the acceptance of democratic values that allowed minorities to mobilize for their rights, and desecuritization of state-minority relations that excluded minorities' claims from the list of security risks for the state. Though he is not entirely optimistic, Kymlicka provides maintenance of peace and individual security, democracy, individual rights, economic prosperity, and inter-group equality as accomplishments of multiethnic federalism in the West. But still, he admits, such kind of federalism has not been a model of constructive inter-cultural exchange. And more, multination federalism has not avoided the recurrence of the question of secession in politics. If these tempt anyone in Ethiopia to suggest a replacement of Ethiopian ethnic federalism, however, Kymlicka's historical account of multination federalism in the West is a bad news: no state, once adopted, has ever moved away from multination federalism.

In his inquiry of the relevance of multination federalism to Africa, Kymlicka finds conflicting positions of minorities and governments. While minorities in Africa seem to require federalism, there is a strong objection in most African states, which he claims, have focused on creating common identity, common future, or pan-ethnic base. Still lack (or non-existent in some cases) of conditions of federalism, namely equality of nations, democracy, and desecuritization of claims of nations in Africa might have also contributed to the resistance by African states. Regarding Ethiopia, Kymlicka admits that the authors of the Ethiopian federation had no choice except ethnic federalism (again those advocating any other form of government to Ethiopia should bear the burden of proving the existence of any other viable option). That is not all. Kymlicka notes of differences of Ethiopian federalism from Western multination federations. These differences, he says, are most evident in practice than constitutional principles. Still on the constitutional front, one typical distinction is the existence of self-

determination to all "nations, nationalities and peoples", which does not exist in the West. According to Kymlicka, self-determination was given in the West only to those nations that presented a clear and strong demand for autonomy. The right of secession, which is not a constitutional principle in the West, is also another distinguishing feature.

The second contributor to the book, Rotimi Suberu, explains the experiences of the Nigerian federation, which aims to manage 'cultural-territorial pluralism and conflict' in the largest state in Africa (Rotimi Suberu, *Federalism and the Management of Ethnic Conflict: the Nigerian Experience*, pp. 65-92). From the positive side, the Nigerian experience has prevented ethno-secessionist violence. Nonetheless, lower-scale communal conflicts and misallocation of resources persisted despite the country's long experience in federalism. A major achievement of multi-state federalism in Nigeria, Suberu identifies, has been the use of the federal structure to 'fragment, cross-cut and sublimate' the identities of each of the three major ethnic groups preempting the 'secession potential' inherent in the 'conflation of ethnic and administrative boundaries'. Another encouraging sign from the Nigerian federation has also been the empowerment of ethnic minorities that were able to administer states in which they became the majority. On the negative side, centralized distributive process of revenues in the Nigerian federation has been taken as a major challenge that created dependence of all governments in the federation on centrally collected oil revenues. The lesson of Nigerian experience to Ethiopia, according to the author, seems to revolve around the success of the federation in holding together of the country's diverse peoples.

The units of multination federations might be divided based on factors such as religion, ethnicity, and language. The third contributor, Rajeev Bhargava, focuses on the analysis of the language based federalism of India (Rajeev Bhargava, *The Evolution and Distinctiveness of India's Linguistic Federalism*, pp. 93-118). Given the vast size and diversity of the country, Bhargava states, Indian federalism is a matter of necessity. As a distinct feature of Indian federalism, the author invokes the unitary bias of Indian federalism. Interestingly, he talks of 'unitary-federal continuum' in the political structure of states and sees each federation to have its own

federalism within the continuum. The three lessons he forwards are: one, every country should have its own form of federal structure. Hence like India or any other federation, Ethiopia has (or should have) its own unique form of federalism. Two, federalism is part of a larger democratic process and hence multination federalism alone is no panacea for problems associated with competing ethno-linguistic claims. Three, different regions may need to be treated differently and hence units of the federation in Ethiopia should expect asymmetric treatment in their relationship with the federal government.

Relying on his role as an active participant in the Ethiopian politics, the fourth contributor, Merera Gudina, reflects on contradictory interpretations of Ethiopian history by competing ethnic elites (Merera Gudina, *Contradictory Interpretations of Ethiopian History: the Need for a New Consensus*, pp. 119-130). For that purpose, Merera briefly outlines three main ethno-nationalist perspectives on Ethiopian history: 'nation building', 'national oppression' and 'colonization' perspectives. Their differences, Merera explains, lie in interpretations of the 'historical events that gave birth to modern Ethiopia' and in solutions proposed for the 'country's contemporary problems'. He advocates 'national oppression' perspective (which characterizes Ethiopian history as 'domination by one group over a multitude of others' and therefore calls for solutions to Ethiopian political problems to rest upon this assumption), while at the same time dismissing 'nation building' as no more in the mainstream politics and challenging the 'colonization' perspective as more or less indefensible. If what Merera says is true, these perspectives will always remain in Ethiopian politics frustrating the democratization of Ethiopia, unless competing elites, whom Merera alleges to have interests as varied as hegemony and secession, reach a national consensus.

In the fifth contribution, Assefa Fiseha grapples with the question of how the Ethiopian Federation was established. (Assefa Fiseha, *Theory versus Practice in the Implementation of Ethiopia's Ethnic Federalism*, pp.131-164). Assefa considers it to be an exaggeration to call the Ethiopian federation as the 'coming together' by mere account of the words of the Constitution. Instead, taking the comments of Yash Ghai, Assefa identifies Ethiopian

federalism as 'withholding' federation (in which the center is dominant owing to its centralized beginning and the unease of devolution of political powers). Assefa outlines the principles of allocation of federal - state powers, supremacy of constitution, constitutional interpretation, and linguistic pluralism in light of the FDRE Constitution, with sporadic comparisons with similar principles in other federations, namely of India, Germany, United States and Switzerland.

Assefa credits the Ethiopian federalism for the survival of Ethiopia through 'commitment to national self-determination and the establishment of regional governments based on nationality'. According to him, the threats posed a decade or two ago by national liberation movements would not have been averted except by multinational federalism we have today. But this acknowledgement on Assefa's part is no match to his scathing criticisms on the practice of federalism in Ethiopia. He identifies the sometimes mistaken assumption of the existence of territorially defined diversity, the inadequacy of territorial definition of ethno-linguistic groups, the difficulty of allocating 'mother states' to more than 80 ethnic groups, and the potential for local tyranny as limitations of the Ethiopian model of federalism. In his compelling accounts of the anomaly between the theory and practice of Ethiopian federalism, Assefa closely investigates the apparent contradiction between 'generously granted constitutional powers and a centralized federal system'. The policy-making process, the party system, and the existing (or rather lack of) intergovernmental relations are identified as principal culprits for the contradiction between theory and practice in the Ethiopian federalism. Unlike the times when there was semblance of genuine federalism at the beginning, Assefa contends that Ethiopian federalism, for various reasons, is unfavorably leaning towards centralization. The Ethio-Eritrean war and the 'federal intervention' law have been identified as probably instigating and cementing the trend. Hence, not surprisingly, Assefa blames the centralizing trend on political developments rather than constitutional standards.

The sixth contribution is made by Gideon Cohen who articulated the arguments against and in favour of the use of local languages in Ethiopia (Gideon Cohen, the Development of Regional and Local Languages in

Ethiopia's Federal System, pp. 165-180). Admitting the use of local languages as manifestations of Article 39 of the Federal Constitution. Cohen affirms the existence of a range of attitudes towards the adoption of regional and local languages. Arguments against the use of local languages include its divisive nature, its limiting effects towards opportunities at state level, and its costs in terms of time and resources. It is the manifestation of the complex nature of Ethiopian federalism that some of the opposing views have been expressed by the people who were supposedly exercising their self-determination through the use of their languages. Arguments for the use of local languages include expression of identity, self-esteem, increased equality, and the beneficial effects of mother tongue as language of education.

In parts seven and eight of the book, empirical studies are provided to show the challenges the Ethiopian federalism has encountered. In part seven, Sarah Vaughan narrates intriguing stories of challenges to Ethiopian federalism from the South. (Sarah Vaughan, Responses to Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia's Southern Region, pp. 181-207). According to Vaughan, a political 'shortsightedness' in the implementation of multination federalism has in some cases resulted in violence (the case of Siemien Omo and the Walayta claim for autonomy). The complexity of the experience of mixed populations (in Kaffa-Sheka) has also posed obstacles to federalism, owing mostly to failure to apply constitutional principles. Another case study of the Gambella regional states is written by Dereje Feyissa in part eight of the book (Dereje Feyissa, The Experience of Gambella Regional State, pp. 208-230). The accounts of series of ethnic violence among local people, sometimes with the involvement of 'highlanders', given by Dereje, would leave one wondering if federalism is a 'blessing or a curse', at least for the peoples of Gambella. Dereje attributes the challenges in GPNRS to the 'new relations of dominance' the regional state exhibits between the two competing ethnic groups of Anywaa and Nuer, which supposedly 'own' the regional state. Suggesting the balancing of group and individual rights as a solution to the dilemma in the region, Dereje contends that the federal government on various counts has not been much of a help in mediating the conflicts arising in the region.

In the last part of the book, Christopher Clapham provides an 'Afterword' (pp. 231- 240), highlighting, commenting, and sometimes reflecting on arguments raised by other contributors in the book. Each of the chapters in the book could be of an independent read. But if one has to read all, the logical arrangement is made in the book, the Western experience first, then individual experiences of Nigeria and India, and finally Ethiopian cases of federalism. The book provides ample theoretical and practical foundations upon which Ethiopian federalism could be debated by all stakeholders: politicians, academics, lawyers, etc. It is appropriate to note that some interesting points raised during the debate in the run-up to the recent Ethiopian election might have been informed by this book.

As almost all of the writers agree, extending, developing, or reinventing federalism is necessary. The Ethiopian federalism unfortunately is too much politicized, preventing its thorough investigation in order to craft viable solutions to emerging problems. Still the Ethiopian federalism has to look forward and develop upon its success. But most of all, it has to rectify its ills outlined in the book and elsewhere for it to sustain. The experiences of the West and of India and Nigeria are helpful. But again peculiar features of the Ethiopian State have to be taken into account. Beyond politicians and academics, the debate on Ethiopian federalism also has to extend to the public at large. After all any major refinement to the Ethiopian federalism has to obtain the consent of all. As Will Kymlicka pointed out, it is early to judge the success or failure of multinational federalism in the West, let alone in Ethiopia. After a decade or more of Ethiopian federalism, however, one might pick up some signs of the future to come. As detailed in the chapters dealing with Ethiopian federalism in the book, those signs do not seem to be good. One might inquire what the next step shall be. As David Turton says, "... there can be no going back to a unitary state structure, in which regional autonomy for sub-state groups is ruled out. There is no alternative, in other words, but to make the experiment [of Ethiopian federalism] work."

