

# The Quest for Regional Statehood in the SNNPRS of Ethiopia: Legal Framework versus Implementation

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## Abstract

*The merger of the five southern regions of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (Regions 7 to 11) into a single region – undertaken with the aim of countering both internal and external political pressure – is the root cause of the quests for regional statehood seen in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples’ Regional State (SNNPRS). However, more recently, these quests have been gaining momentum since the political transition Ethiopia underwent in 2018. It has been suggested that the quests could be addressed by means of a cluster formula, one involving the formation of a regional state by merging numerous zones and special woredas, but this is questionable in terms of the current constitutional framework and practice. The purpose of this study is thus to conduct a critical analysis of the Ethiopian federation’s legal frameworks and practices in response to the quests for regional statehood in the SNNPRS. The study finds that the quest for statehood in the region brings to light the country’s inconsistent and arbitrary implementation of multinational federalism. Several factors, among them lack of fair political representation, imbalanced infrastructural development, and poor-quality public service delivery, have intensified demands for regional statehood. The study suggests that, in order to place a limit on arbitrary and inconsistent governmental intervention, the Constitution’s provisions in regard to state formation should be amended in the light of criteria such as administrative convenience, economic viability, and population size. Moreover, the federation should be restructured by recognising local government in the federal constitution so as to ensure sub-regional self-rule and self-determination, as well as equitable local level development. Overall, the study underlines that what is vital in Ethiopia today is a genuine and consistent response to quests for regional statehood and the needs articulated for social, political, economic, and infrastructural development.*

**Keywords:** regional statehood, cluster formula, SNNPRS, federalism, Ethiopia

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# 1. Introduction

Ethiopia is a multinational and multicultural state, with historians such as Rosini, Bulatovich, De Salvaick, and Levine having observed that it is characterised by cultural, religious, linguistic, and historical diversity (Záhorík, 2014; Bulatovich, 2000). Paradoxically, though, since its inception as a modern state, successive governments have sought to give it a mono-national identity through the social, political, legal and constitutional frameworks they adopted.<sup>39</sup> As Fiseha (2017) notes, Ethiopia has been seen, , as a multicultural and multi-religious state on the one hand and as one nation, one country, and one territory on the other. Moreover, the populations of the country have been considered as subjects rather than citizens, and in the process treated harshly by the central authority (Ahmad, 1999; Bonacci & Meckelburg, 2017; Markakis & Ayele, 1986; Markakis, 2011; Meckelburg, 2017 & 2016; Merera, 2011; Zewde, 1991).

Notably, the imperial regime's nation-building project attempted to purge the country of diverse identities and reconstruct a single national identity by imposing the dominant culture, identity, language, and religion on the newly incorporated societies. According to Gebru (2009), regimes in Ethiopia since the late 19th century have taken a Jacobin-republicanism approach<sup>40</sup> to nation-building, forcing ethno-national groups to abandon their identity and accept the identity of other ethnic groups through assimilation. Consequently, elite imposition of the culture and identity of a so-called core ethnic group on other, peripheral ethnic groups was common (Green, 2018; Fessha, 2019 & 2010). This sparked widespread opposition to the imperial authority, resulting in its demise and the installation of the Derg government during the 1974 revolution (Horst, 2020; Yusuf, 2019a & 2019b; Aweke, 2021; Merera, 2007).

But, according to Merera (2007), despite the Derg's promises of prosperity, a harsh military interlude followed: civil war raged throughout the period of the Derg dictatorship, with the state using brutal force to repress political opponents and consolidate power (Geremew & Alamineh, 2021; De Waal, 1991). In 1987, the regime adopted the Constitution of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia as a superficial means of addressing issues of ethnic diversity, while in practice following the same trends as its predecessor (Berhe & Gebresilassie, 2020). Finally, the Derg was toppled from power by joint ethno-national forces in 1991. The Transitional Government and later multi-national federalism that embedded different fronts and parties had been established in Ethiopia.

A federal state structure was then introduced by way of Proclamation No. 7/1992, with the intention to accommodate diversity (TGE, 1992). The hith-

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<sup>39</sup> See the 1931 and 1955 constitutions.

<sup>40</sup> Jacobin republicanism is a form of governance that denies or suppresses ethnic diversity and imposes the language, culture, and religion of one ethnic group on other groups. It is a top-down approach to nation-building. The Jacobin tradition arose during the French Revolution, and was aimed at forming a nation-state through a powerful state that would assume responsibility for directing society's affairs and molding its citizens through assimilation (Grillo, 1998, cited in Gebru, 2009).

erto denied multinational character of the country was accommodated in a newly designed federal structure based on language, identity, settlement patterns, and consent (FDRE, 1995). Yet though the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) grants nations, nationalities, and peoples the right to self-rule, they have been denied the opportunity to exercise it fully (Fiseha, 2022; Halabo, 2019).

This is particularly, and explicitly, evidenced in the case of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPRS). The position of the SNNPRS in the Ethiopian federal structure is acutely paradoxical, and has resulted in heated political debate and opposition. While constitutional, institutional and political mechanisms are in place to respond to the diversity within the SNNPRS (Dessalegn & Afesha, 2019), these have not been implemented in regard to addressing the quest for regional statehood. In the SNNPRS, multiple nations and nationalities have been merged into a single regional state (*ibid*), and in opposition to it, some nations, right from the outset of that state's formation, have pursued a quest for statehood in the face of what they regard as a lack of genuine federalism and constitutionalism. This has led to violent ethnic conflict, death, displacement, and the destruction of resources (Dessalegn & Afesha, 2019; Hailu, 2019; Halabo, 2019; Belay, 2013 & 2014; Legide, 2019).

The present article therefore considers the question: Why are demands for regional statehood still ongoing political problems in Ethiopia? The former Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) adopted a variety of measures to support federalism, such as establishing the Council of Nationalities, as well as woredas and nationalities/special zones, but failed to address the quest for regional statehood. This study examines this quest, and how it is entertained, in the context of the SNNPRS. Although the country's legal frameworks provide for a multinational federal structure (FDRE, 1995), the nationalities question has not been sufficiently resolved under this federal design (Fiseha, 2017 & 2022).

Recently, with the establishment of the Sidama National Regional State and South West Ethiopia Peoples' Regional State, the SNNPRS has been in a turbulent condition, with a number of ethnic groups intensifying demands for regional statehood. The federal government, in response, has proposed a "cluster formula"<sup>41</sup> (Borkena, 2023) for organising the SNNPRS into four regional states (Bereket, 2020). In terms of this formula, the SNNPRS would be divided into two further states over and above the Sidama National Regional State and South West Ethiopia Peoples' Regional State.

Against this backdrop, the article analyses the quest – or various quests – for regional statehood in the SNNPRS, doing so by juxtaposing the current legal

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41 The term is not formally used by the government, but is common in public discourse and academic writing (for instance, in Tilahun et al., 2020, who refer to "cluster regions"), where it denotes the establishment of regional statehood through the merging of different zones, special woredas, and/or ethnic groups. Bereket (2020) asserts that this is the new approach to forming regional states in Ethiopia. Currently, two regions have been formed on the basis of the cluster formula: the South West Ethiopia Peoples' Regional State (clustering Bench Sheko, Dawro, Keffa, Sheka, and West Omo zones, and the Konta special woreda), and the South

frameworks with the state of practice in actuality and proceeding on the basis of a critical postmodernist research paradigm. It examines issues such as the justifications for, and implications of, merging the five regional states that existed under the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) into a single regional state; the factors that motivated the quest for regional statehood in the SNNPRS; the prevailing institutional and legal frameworks in regard to this quest; the response to the quest for regional statehood and its constitutionality; and the compatibility of the “cluster formula” with ethno-national federalism and the formula’s capacity to address the current, as well as future, quests for statehood.

## 2. Self-determination and the Formation of Regional States

According to Cruz (2018), the right to self-determination refers to the ability of peoples to freely choose their political status and pursue their own social, economic, and cultural development. It is significant in the management of diversity and multiculturalism, as well in meeting historical aspirations for sovereignty and self-governance; furthermore, recognition of the right to self-determination is said to decrease the likelihood of separatist movements and to serve as a tool for conflict reduction (Cats-Baril, 2018).

An aspect of self-determination is the creation of state boundaries, which should take into account the language, religion, cultural identity, and traditions of ethnic groups. Logic dictates that individuals with a shared ethnic identity should be grouped together within the same region for purposes of self-government and decision-making on issues that directly affect their culture, language, and religion. As such, it is crucial to keep three key principles in mind when regional states are created. First, the mere creation of regions is unlikely to satisfy every minority’s every demand for self-government and power-sharing; secondly, the creation of regions should be practical, that is, socio-politically and economically sustainable; and thirdly, other formal and informal techniques for the protection of minorities should also be employed. If ethnic minorities’ ways of life are ignored when regions are created, or the economic viability of regions is over-emphasised, the regions could fail to provide minorities with the security and accommodation they desire, resulting in calls for new regions and, in turn, protracted conflict (De Villiers, 2012).

Under Article 39(1) of the FDRE Constitution, all Ethiopian nations, nationalities, and peoples have an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secede. Sub-article 2 provides that any nation, nationality, or people has the right to speak, write, and develop its own language, to express, develop, and promote its culture, and to preserve its history. Furthermore, sub-article 3 guarantees the right to complete self-governance, which includes the right of a nation, nationality, or people to create institutions of government in the region that it occupies, as well as to enjoy fair representation in state and federal administrations. In addition, Article 47(2) of the Constitution grants every nation, nationality, and people the right to establish, at any time, its own federated state.

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Ethiopia Regional State (clustering the zones of Ale, Ari, Basketo, Burji, Gamo, Gardula, Gedeo, Gofa, Konso, Koore, South Omo, and Wolayita).

Viewed comparatively, procedures for forming regional states vary from federation to federation. In Nigeria, for example, states were constituted mostly by military regimes rather than via constitutional procedures; in India, the two houses of parliament vote by a simple majority to form new states or change the boundaries of existing ones, with the proviso that affected state legislatures be given the opportunity to voice their concerns before Parliament takes any action. In Kenya, a two-thirds majority in both chambers of the legislature is required, while in Australia, Pakistan, Somalia, Spain, and the United States, the approval of the affected component units is required along with that of the national assembly. Other countries, such as Ethiopia, Germany, Iraq, and Switzerland, hold referendums when forming new constituent entities (Anderson, 2014). In Ethiopia, Article 47(2) of the FDRE Constitution stipulates that nations, nationalities, and peoples may form states under, inter alia, the following conditions: when the demand for statehood is approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Council of the Nation, Nationality, or People concerned, and the demand is presented in writing to the State Council; when the Council that received the demand organises a referendum within one year; and when demand for statehood is supported by a majority vote in that referendum.

Numerous criteria exist for redrawing the borders of new regional states in federations. These relate to (among other things) financial and other expenses, administrative convenience, development potential, institutional capability, spatial coherence, physical infrastructure, previous borders, and socio-cultural issues (Anderson, 2014). In the case of Ethiopia, Article 46(2) of the FDRE Constitution provides that states are “delimited on the basis of the settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the peoples concerned”. However, the approval of the general population has seldom been taken into account in the construction of current regional entities. According to Anderson (2014), “in Ethiopia the decisions regarding constituent unit boundaries were essentially made within the ruling coalition ... The process had minimal openness and very limited public consultation” (p. 6) Similarly, Legide (2019) notes that the top-down approach to regional reorganisation has been sharply criticised, and that some of the resulting entities were established arbitrarily without meaningful dialogue and the approval of the peoples involved.

In a discussion of the Nepali federal endeavour, Mistry (2020) notes that the restructuring of Nepal into an identity-based federal system was premised on empowering and providing autonomous power to subaltern ethnic groups. He describes the motives for introducing federalism in Nepal in the following terms:

The urge for federalism was not only for the decentralisation of power but also for a wider agenda of inclusion that encompasses other institutional reforms to ensure proportional representation of all the ethnic groups and recognition of the ethnic and cultural diversity by redefining Nepali nationalism ... The Maoists promoted ethnicity-based federalism or “ethnic federalism” by renaming provinces after the most numerous ethnic and regional groups. Few indigenous groups claimed preferential rights to natural resources of the region [where] they live and priority entitlement to political leadership positions in the future provinces (pp. 13–14).

The Nepali case illustrates not only that federalising a state entail ensuring self-government and power-sharing, but that what underlies this is the recognition of ethnic diversity.

The Swiss federation may also be taken as a model in view of its success in upholding self-rule and recognising diverse identities (Belser, 2018; Koller, 2002). Since its establishment in 1848, it has remained the world's most decentralised federation, with its three tiers of government (federal, cantonal and communal) all enjoying notable autonomy. Switzerland is a “coming-together” federation which was created in a bottom-up process based on mutual agreement between previously independent states. Evidently, diversity is a core determinant of the Swiss federation. In this regard, Koller (2002) points out that “linguistic and cultural differences are admittedly not the only reason why federalism is an existential necessity for Switzerland, but they are the most important ones” (p. 2).

In general, the need to recognise identity and diversity is a singularly crucial factor to take into account when structuring or restructuring federations in deeply divided societies.

### 3. Research Methodology

The nature of federalism in general, and multinational federalism in particular, is the subject of great debate among both scholars in the social sciences and practitioners in the political realm. On the one hand, arguments are made that multinational federalism is a solution for political problems in deeply divided societies; on the other, it is regarded as a cause of division in such societies, or at any rate a factor instigating or worsening their disintegration. Scholars such as Horowitz (2006), Keating (2007), and Martínez-Herrera (2010) have lent credence to the latter thesis. All three of them contend that federalism, when viewed as a conflict-resolution strategy, may inadvertently increase separatist tendencies.

The quest for regional statehood by diverse groups in Ethiopia and the responses thereto are constituted within this debate and sandwiched between its two poles. Accordingly, in examining such quests, researchers need to adopt suitable philosophical foundations that enable them to discern the issues under investigation. In this study, critical postmodernism is deemed the most appropriate philosophy for examining issues relating to quests for statehood in the SNNPRS.

Critical postmodernism is a synthesis of critical theory and postmodern theory. The goal of critical theory is to expose, critique, and change the distorted reality of social practice and ideology. It serves an emancipatory function, requiring the researcher to uncover unequal and oppressive relations in the social, political, and economic order and raise critical consciousness (Mack, 2010; Stinson & Bullock, 2012). According to Crotty (1998, cited in Stinson & Bullock, 2012), critical theorists believe that as marginalised people exercise their right to participate in the socio-cultural and historical transformation of their society with a critical consciousness, they become aware of their true situation, intervene in it, and thus take control of their destiny.

However, critical theory has limitations in regard to indicating what happens

after emancipation and consciousness-creation. This is where postmodernism comes into play. As a philosophy, it is renowned for its inclination towards deconstruction, which aims to alter the prevailing philosophy of foundationalism. Critical postmodernism thus entails the advancement of new theoretical perspectives that contextualise knowledge by critically assessing its foundationalism propositions (Jarvis, 1998). Unlike positivist theories, critical postmodernism emphasises the plurality of truth, which makes it particularly apposite in the case of Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, there exist multiple discourses regarding quests for regional statehood; moreover, there are changing trends in the country’s identity-based political discourses. As such, critical postmodernism is an appropriate philosophy to inform this particular research project.

Here, the study adopted a qualitative approach and critical research design. This methodology was selected because it would provide the researchers with a systematic means of describing, analysing, and interpreting quests for statehood in the SNNPRS. The study drew on primary as well as secondary sources of data. To collect primary data, in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 purposefully selected key informants (see Table 1 for detailed information); as for secondary sources, these included legal documents, reports, books, journal articles, policy briefs, newspapers, videos, audio, and images. The data collected were categorised into thematic areas based on their similarities. Primary and secondary data were then used in complementary ways to reinforce and substantiate one another.

Table 1: Codes for key informant interviews

Code	Number and affiliation of respondents
PSI01 and PSI02	Two senior researchers from PSI
FoF01	One expert from the Forum of Federation
HoF01	One official from the House of Federation (HoF)
HoF02 and HoF03	Two experts from the HoF
CFG/PhDS01 and CFG/PhDS02	Two PhD candidates at the AAU Center for Federalism and Governance Studies
AAU/Staff01	One academic staff member and researcher at the AAU
SFPL01	One senior former political leader (part of the TGE and member of the central committee of the EPRDF)
SOPF01	One senior opposition politician (part of the TGE and a popular figure in the SNNPRS)
LCPC01	Legal consultant and political commentator in the SNNPRS

Source: The authors

#### 4. The dilemmas of federal design in Ethiopia

Under the TGE, the territory that came to be known as the SNNPRS initially consisted of five regions that had been functional for over a year (SOPF01). Later, in 1995, they were amalgamated into a single region, the SNNPRS, a development that would have far-reaching social, political, and economic consequences. Indeed, Ethiopia’s federal design in general – and its restructuring of regional states in particular – has been criticised as an ill-starred

arrangement imposed by the central government, given that the states were formed without genuine political consensus or the consent of the public (Legide, 2019).

The discrepancy between the constitutional criteria for the formation of regional states and the practice followed in actuality was all too apparent. For instance, whereas the Harari minority (with, according to the 2007 national census, a population of only 15,858) were granted regional status in the SNNPRS, other ethnic groups with populations of more than a million were denied it. Such groups included the Sidama, with a population of 2,908,491; Wolayta with 1,611,190; Hadiya with 1,206,891; Gurage with 1,130,631; and Gamo with 1,046,519 (FDRE Population Census Commission [PCC], 2008). These and other groups were not given the status of regional statehood and amalgamated under the SNNPRS.

According to Fiseha (2017), even though there are about 76 officially recognised ethnic groups in Ethiopia, the Constitution initially established only nine regional states. Such a structuring of regional statehood was at odds with the provision of the Constitution which unconditionally allows all ethnic groups to form regional states or at least self-determination. The result was that the initial configuration of regional states was problematic, eventuating later in political claims and conflict, particularly in the SNNPRS. The latter was the most diverse region in the country, one in which no less than 56 ethnic groups were merged into a single region. Study informants pointed out that the merger of the five regions was not only inconsistent with the constitutional principles of self-determination, but also implemented without the required legal and policy changes (that is, at least without modifying Proclamation No. 7/1992) (SOPF01).

As this suggests, Ethiopia's federal arrangement has been based on top-down decision-making serving the interests of the central government and, in this case, those of the co-opted political elites of the SNNPRS (Aalen, 2011). In other words, the formation of the SNNPRS was a purely political decision (SOPF01, FSPL01). The intention of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was to constitute another region that could counterbalance the political pressure from the dominant regions (FoF01). One of this study's informants, who was part of the committee assessing issues related to statehood in the SNNPRS during the transitional period, had recommended to the then Prime Minister that the territory be split into at least two regions (FSPL01), but this failed to materialise. Moreover, according to other informants (SOPF01; FSPL01), the decision to establish the SNNPRS went against the interests of the people and elites of the time. The government's decision was aimed, then, at defusing the strong political coalition – namely the Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Coalition<sup>42</sup> – that had strong support and political legitimacy

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42 A coalition formed in the SNNPRS in 1992. It consisted of the Gurage People's Democratic Front; Omotic People's Democratic Front; Kaffa People's Democratic Union; Hadiya National Democratic Organization; Yem National Democratic Movement; Wolayta People's Democratic Front; Sidama Liberation Movement; Gedeo People's Democratic Organization; and Burji People's Democratic Organization. In November of the same year, four more groups joined the coalition: the Dawro People's Democratic Movement; Timbaro People's Democratic Union; Omo People's Democratic Union; and Kabena Nationality Democratic Organization.



in the original five regions (SOPF01).

Consequently, since its inception, the SNNPRS was opposed by the constituent units of the region. The increasing claims for autonomous regional statehood that have been witnessed are, that is to say, the repercussions of the amalgamation of a multi-ethnic society into a single region (Bereket, 2020; Tronvoll, Boroje & Tezera, 2020). Tilahun et al. (2020) observe as follows:

People opposed this measure, and those who expressed their views in this regard were harassed and arrested. The government also sent security forces to suppress the public demand. There was no positive response from the concerned government bodies until 2018. Many informants from the zone complained that the government detained several people that asked the question of the zone on behalf of the community. The informant said that the response is killing, imprisoning, and pressurising the community (p. 10).

Indeed, the results of the present study's interviews indicate that the amalgamation of several large ethnic groups into the SNNPRS was a political miscalculation and that, conversely, the claims made for autonomous regional statehood are authentic and genuinely believed to be legitimate (HoF01; PSI01; PSI02; CFG/PhDS01 and LCPC01). In particular, considering the population size of certain regional states such as Harari, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambela, and Affar, amalgamating multi-ethnic groups under the SNNPRS is regarded as inconsistent. However, notwithstanding the relevant constitutional provisions and the population sizes of the ethnic groups, the EPRDF government proceeded to merge these and other groups into one regional state; paradoxically, though, it provided recognition and statehood status to ethnic groups with smaller populations than others – for instance, Harari (183,344), Affar (1,411,092), Benishangul-Gumuz (670,847), and Gambela (306,916) (FDRE-PCC, 2008;

Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia, 2008). While these ethnic groups with smaller population size regional status, groups such as Sidama, Hadiya, Woliata, Guragie and others (see table 2 below) in SNNPRS has been denied regional statehood.

As the statistics in tables 2 and 3 below suggest, the design of the federation in general and the formation of the SNNPRS in particular have been far from an exercise in political impartiality. From the outset, ethnic groups in the SNNPRS have been seeking regional statehood on the basis precisely of impartial, objective characteristics such as their population size. The manner in which this regional state was formed, along with the EPRDF government's incongruous approach to population size, has stood in contradiction not only to the principles of multinational federalism but to the key reason (the national operation thesis<sup>43</sup>) that the EPRDF waged such a long civil war against

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43 The national oppression thesis is the primary thesis for which nationality-based opposition groups were formed and engage in the war with national government. It is at this argument that multi-national federalism has been used since 1991 and formalized in the 1995 ERDF Constitution (see EPRDF, 1995).

the Derg. As Tensay (2019) notes, the design of the SNNPRS was a glaring anomaly in view of the way in which regional states were created elsewhere in the country.

Table 2: Distribution of major ethnic groups

Ethnic Group	2007		1994	
	Population		Population	
	Number	%	Number	%
Oromo	25,488,344	34.5	17,080,318	32.1
Amhara	19,867,817	26.9	16,007,933	30.1
Somali	4,581,793	6.2	3,160,540	5.9
Tigris	4,483,776	6.1	3,284,568	6.2
Sidama	2,966,377	4.0	1,842,314	3.5
Guragie	1,867,350	2.5	2,290,274	4.3
Welaita	1,707,074	2.3	1,269,216	2.4
Hadiya	1,284,366	1.7	927,933	1.7
Afar	1,276,372	1.7	979,367	1.8
Gamo	1,107,163	1.5	719,847	1.4

Source: FDRE-PCC (2008, p. 16)

Table 3: Distribution of population by region: 1994 and 2007

Region	1994		2007	
	Number	%	Number	%
Tigray	3,136,267	5.9	4,314,456	5.8
Afar	1,060,573	2.0	1,411,092	1.9
Amhara	13,834,297	25.9	17,214,056	23.3
Oromia	18,732,525	35.0	27,158,471	36.7
Somali	3,198,514	6.0	4,439,147	6.0
Benishangul Gumuz	460,459	0.9	670,847	0.9
SNNP	10,377,028	19.4	15,042,531	20.4
Gambella	181,862	0.3	306,916	0.4
Harari	131,139	0.2	183,344	0.2
Addis Ababa	2,112,737	4.0	2,738,248	3.7
Dire Dawa	251,864	0.5	342,827	0.5
Special Enumeration		0.0	96,570	0.1
Country Total	53,477,265	100.0	73,918,505	100.0

Source: FDRE-PCC (2008, p. 10)

## 5. Justifications for the formation of the SNNPRS

There are different opinions as to why more than 56 ethnic groups were merged into one regional state. According to Vaughan (2003), the government's reasons for merging the five former regions into a single entity centred around economic efficiency. Others, however, contend that it was essentially a political project of the EPRDF and in the interests of certain coopted political elites

in the SNNPRS (FSPL01; SOPF01; LCPC01). In this vein, Clapham (2006, cited in Legide, 2019), maintains that it was intended to counterbalance political pressure from numerically superior regions. Berhe & Gebresilassie (2020) argue, likewise, that rather than being motivated by a moral imperative to enable nations to exercise self-governance, the consolidation of the five regional states of Southern Ethiopia into one region in 1995 was a political expedient. Hence, it is clear that constitutional violations have undermined Ethiopia's nations and nationalities' ability to exercise the right to self-government both during the tenure of the EPRDF regime and in its aftermath.

According to a key informant, there are four reasons that the SNNPRS was established. The first was to set up a counterweight to the Debub Hibret (see footnote 4), or Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Coalition, at the time a popular political party in the south (SOPF01; AAU/Staff01; CFG/PhDS01). The second reason was to create a power equilibrium in which the TPLF found a counterbalancing the pressure from political elite in national politics (FSPL01). Thirdly, the EPRDF established the SNNPRS to counteract perceptions among opposition political elites that it was attempting to divide the country along ethnic lines (FoF01; AAU/Staff01). The fourth reason, given the small size of most SNNPR constituent units, related to administrative efficiency and considerations to do with human resources (HoF01; HoF02; HoF03).

In general, both the literature and the data gathered from informants show that political motives predominated in the formation of the SNNPRS, with the ruling party seeking to overcome opposition and pressure internal to the region as well as external to it. One of the main obstacles to implementing constitutional principles of self-rule, according to Berhe & Gebresilassie (2020), was the incompatibility of the party's model of centralised vanguard leadership with the constitutional requirement for self-rule; the authors claim that there were also legal and procedural gaps in implementing the norms. Yet, whatever the reasons prompted the amalgamation of a multiplicity of ethnic groups under the roof of one regional state, it led eventually to a lengthy, complex political crisis.

## 6. The quest for regional statehood in the SNNPRS

Many ethnic groups refused to accept the SNNPRS merger, which gave rise to quests for regional statehood that continue to this day (Legide, 2019). For instance, the Sidama had long appealed for statehood, only to have the EPRDF deny their claim, contrary to the provisions of the Constitution (Legide, 2019). They were not alone: as Bereket (2020) points out, various zones in the SNNPRS have been petitioning for regional statehood for more than two decades. Indeed, after the major changes that took place in the EPRDF and Abiy Ahmed's rise to power in 2018 as Prime Minister, the people of the region resumed their efforts with new intensity, taking to the streets throughout the SNNPRS to demand vindication of their right to self-rule and autonomy.

As noted, Article 39 of the Constitution provides the unconditional right to self-determination, including secession, right which ethnic groups use as justification for their quest for regional statehood. Similarly, Article 47 provides nations, nationalities, and peoples with the right to establish their own region-

al state at any time. These articles are supported by other constitutional provisions regarding the rights of nations, nationalities, and peoples. For instance, there are provisions concerning equitable representation, distribution of resources, and socio-economic development, all of which lend further impetus to the quest for regional statehood in the SNNPRS.

In the light of this framework, study respondents argued that there is no legal ground on which to deny the quest for statehood (HoF01; CFG/PhDS01; CFG/PhDS02; LCPC01). Some argued, indeed, that self-determination and self-rule could even be exercised at the sub-regional level (PSI02). However, there is no constitutional guarantee enabling sub-regional governments to exercise a full measure of self-determination, given that regional governments have a prerogative power to control subnational governments. While it is true that certain federal countries grant constitutionally recognised self-rule to third-level governments (Belser, 2018; Koller, 2002), the Ethiopian federal system is not only lacking in this regard but lacking generally in consistency between law and practice – the case in point here being that the SNNPRS was established as a single regional state notwithstanding the fact that under law its numerous ethnic groups could each have formed their own self-contained regions.

In the effort to assuage popular grievances and find a lasting solution, the possibility of “clustering” the SNNPRS has emerged as an option. The notion of clustering this state into four regions, which would include the Sidama National Regional State and one special zone, came to light following the changes within the EPRDF and the launch in December 2019 of its successor, the Prosperity Party. The Southern Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (SEPDM) set up a committee to undertake a technical study of the question of autonomy and the SNNPRS’ reorganisation, but upon the committee’s failure, the Peace Ambassador Committee was established under the Office of the Prime Minister to investigate the issue and recommend a new arrangement for the region (Bereket, 2020). This committee conducted a study and, among other things, proposed that the SNNPRS be restructured into four regional states – an arrangement (as mentioned) commonly known as the “cluster formula”. In spite of this, however, various zones have rejected the idea of being clustered with others within a common region, holding steadfast to their demands for autonomous regions of their own (Bereket, 2020).

Among the peoples of the SNNPR, the desire for autonomy is often deep-rooted, and in the case of the Sidama – as a notable example – these roots go far back in time. Historically, the Sidama’s quest for autonomy may be traced to the imperial era; later, during the era of the Derg regime, they engaged in organised resistance through a liberation movement, combatting the Derg alongside Oromos, Tigrayans, Somalis and others (Vaguan, 2003). The forcible merger in 1995 of pre-existing regions into the SNNPRS was thus a source of profound dissatisfaction that compelled the Sidama to enter a struggle for statehood (Legide, 2019, Fessha, 2019).

In the course of this struggle, a signal event was the infamous Looqqe Massacre of May 2002, in which federal authorities killed a number of unarmed protestors (Tronvoll, Boroje, & Tezera, 2020). Another event of similar consequentiality came in 2005, when the Sidama Zonal Council officially endorsed

the establishment of a Sidama state. In a similar vein, the SNNPRS national-ity council decided, too, that the quest for statehood was constitutional, and began to facilitate the paving of the road to statehood. However, interference from the central government impeded the Sidama's quest for statehood until as recently as 2019 (Tronvoll, Boroje, & Tezera, 2020; Legide, 2019). It was in this period that the EPRDF's internal crisis and the country's broader transition opened up the political space that rekindled enthusiasm within the SNNPRS for pursuing regional statehood. So it came to pass that, in a referendum held in 2019, fully 97.7 per cent of Sidamas voted in favour of regional statehood, thereby confirming the Sidama people's long-standing desire for self-determination (Tronvoll, Boroje, & Tezera, 2020).

The formation of the Sidama National Regional State was followed by some dozen or so calls for regional statehood (Tensay, 2019; AAU/Staff01), with almost every zone in the SNNPRS submitting a claim to become a regional state. As Tronvoll, Boroje, & Tezera (2020) note, during 2018–2019, “an avalanche of eleven or more regional statehood claims were endorsed by various zonal councils in [the] SNNPRS” (p. 11). Among others, the Gurage, Gofa, Gedeo, Keffa, Gamo, Kambata-Tambaro, Bench-Maji, Hadiya, South Omo, Wolayta, and Dawro all embarked on, or renewed, quests for regional statehood (Kulle, 2021; Tilahun et al., 2020; PSI01; AAU/Staff01). In the case of the Gurage, for example, the Gurage Zonal Council approved the regional statehood demand in November 2018 and remains firmly opposed to the cluster formula, affirming instead its demand for an autonomous Gurage regional state (Addis Standard, 2022a).

As regards the Wolayta ethnic group, their quest – grounded in distant history and initiated upon the establishment of the SNNPRS – has been particularly bold and well organised since the political transition of 2018. Tensay (2019) points out that their striving for independent regional statehood reached its climax as a result of conflict with the Sidama in Hawassa in June 2018. Setting out the grounds on which the Wolayta pursue regional statehood, the author cites, first, the argument that socio-economic and political reforms to their benefit can be achieved only through regional statehood, since an administrative unit which is structured and run by others cannot, or is disinclined to, advance such reforms; the reasoning is hence that, to achieve reform, they require the political and administrative power necessary for they themselves to negotiate with the federal government. The second line of argumentation invokes historical claims that underline their distinctiveness as an ethnic group and the justness of their cause. The historical claims are to the effect that, until their subjugation by Emperor Menilik II in 1894, the Wolayta had governed themselves via their own administrative, justice, defence and currency systems, all of which confers on them a social and cultural identity that differentiates them from others and elevates their claim to statehood as an endeavour to restore their rightful former glory (Tensay, 2019).

The plausibility of these and other arguments raises the question of why the federal government chose to grant regional statehood to the Sidama yet deny it to the rest of the ethnic groups, who also strongly insist on their entitlement to it. It is believed that what contributed significantly to the recognition of the Sidama's regional state is that their elites are especially proficient at political mobilisation and organisation, which is accompanied too by a strong politi-

cal consciousness. In addition, unlike quests emanating from other zones, the Sidama's quest for regional statehood has been linked to the formation of the Sidama National Liberation Front, a strong opposition group of comparable stature to other liberation movements such as the TPLF, Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF).

More recently, and as another key factor, the political transformation of 2018 created a favourable environment for the Sidama to press their claim and fulfil a long-standing aspiration, in the process opening the floodgates for numerous other claims by their peers in the SNNPRS (AAU/Staff01). However, the federal government has been unwilling to grant regional statehood to the rest of the ethnic groups on the grounds that it is not financially, administratively, or politically feasible, and has proposed that regional states be based on cluster formulas (Ethiopian News Agency, 2023).

## 7. The causes of quests for regional statehood

A variety of economic, political, constitutional, and historical factors have driven the quests for regional statehood witnessed in the SNNPRS. These are each examined below.

### 7.1 Economic factors

The FDRE Constitution guarantees equitable economic development to all nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia. Article 43(1), (2) and (3) and Article 89(1), (2), (4), (5) and (6) provide for equality of development, equitable benefit from national resources, equal opportunities to improve economic conditions, and the promotion of equitable distribution of wealth. Additionally, provision is made for special social assistance to regions which are the least advantaged in terms of social and economic and social development; for holding and deploying land and natural resources for the common benefit; and for the development of people. Moreover, the Constitution grants a right to participate in the formulation of national development policies and programmes. These provisions constitute the legal basis for advancing the economic development of all the nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia – and hence, according both to study informants and to secondary sources, they are the primary economically related factors motivating the quest for regional statehood in the SNNPRS.

They do so in two respects. First, nations, nationalities, and peoples have a constitutional right to the equitable distribution of resources, participation in development policies and programmes, and to improving their livelihoods and the like. As such, demands for regional statehood are linked to demands for equitable distribution of resources and development. In this regard, Tilahun et al. (2020) found that the need for better development opportunities is a major driving force in claims for regional statehood – nearly three-quarters of their respondents said that the quest for regional statehood is linked to development. Informants in the present study echoed this, pointing out that quests for statehood are seen as a strategy for securing development (HoF02; HoF03; CFG/PhDS01; LCPC01) and receiving funds directly from the federal government (PSI01). Sometimes, local elites create a narrative in which the members of an ethnic group are portrayed as benefiting from the fruits of development if

they form their own regional state and obtain a larger slice of the federal budget than sharing an administrative region with others (HoF01; PSI01; PSI02; AAU/Staff01; CFG/PhDS01; LCPC01).

A second economic factor motivating claims for regional statehood is the lack of equitable development and resource distribution. In this respect, one of the main reasons for seeking regional statehood stems from the widespread view among elites as well as ordinary people that the SNNPRS did not benefit them equitably in economic terms. A regular refrain, for instance, is that development in Hawassa, the regional capital, took place at the expense of other parts of the region (HoF01; PSI01; PSI02; CFG/PhDS01; LCPC01; FSPL01). On the basis of information collected from 14 zones and 853 respondents, Tilahun et al. (2020) make the following observation:

Respondents in all zones claimed that they have resources that can support their future region as well as the country at large. Besides, they did not benefit from infrastructure developments from the existing SNNPR government. Many informants felt some zones of [the] SNNPR such as Sidama and Wolaytta have better infrastructure. Informants argued [that] resources are concentrated in the regional capital, Hawassa, but the university graduates from other zones cannot go to Hawassa to work. Several of the respondents mentioned their belief that having their own state would allow them to have control over the revenue collected from various taxes that are linked with, for example according to Dilla Zone informants, the Yirga Chefe coffee. Perceived unfair distribution of federal budget has been also mentioned by the respondents as one of the driving factors behind the demand for a Hadiya state. There is also a feeling of loss expressed by the informants with the secession of Sidama and the loss of Hawassa as the capital of the SNNPRS (p. 13).

As Tilahun et al. (2020) suggest, inequalities in development are closely linked to inequalities in the distribution of national resources. This is evident in comparisons of regional-state population sizes (see Table 3), zonal population sizes in the SNNPRS, and federal subsidies. For instance, in a comparison of the population size of the Harari region with that of the (former) Sidama zone, Asnake (2009) notes that

[t]he Harari<sup>44</sup> (185,000 population) region for the 2006/07 fiscal year received a subsidy of 120,530,000 Ethiopian Birr (ETB) [about €10,0441,000] from the coffers of the federal government. In contrast, for the same fiscal year, the Sidama<sup>45</sup> (2,776,928 population) received a subsidy of 30,756,000 ETB (about €2,563,000) from the southern region (p. 91).

Other economic factors motivating the pursuit of regional statehood relate to the geographical dispersion of settlements in the SNNPRS, the relative spatial location of towns and villages, the distances between administrative

44 The Harari account for 0.02 per cent of the Ethiopian population (FDRE-PCC, 2008).

45 The Sidama account for 4 per cent of the Ethiopian population (FDRE-PCC, 2008).

units and the regional capital (Hawassa), and the various cost implications of these considerations. For instance, transportation costs for travel from the remotest areas to Hawassa are said to be enormous due to the length and difficulty of the journeys (LCPC01; AAU/Staff01; HoF02; HoF03). Tilahun et al. (2020) suggest in this regard that travelling distances of a thousand kilometres or more from a zonal woreda town to Hawassa are not uncommon. Under circumstances like these, the prospect of autonomous regional statehood is attractive as a means of obviating the barriers of geography and thereby reducing burdensome administrative costs.

## 7.2 Political factors

The quest for regional statehood plays out, needless to say, in the context of the country's wider dynamics. As such, one broad yet basic political factor influencing the pursuit of statehood is the availability of strategic opportunities for doing so. Since the 1990s, the ruling EPRDF had firmly suppressed such quests, but, as mentioned, the field of play changed significantly in 2018 when it was challenged both by internal conflict and by heated opposition from a variety of regions throughout the country. Thereafter, in a transformed political space, the quest for regional statehood has flourished. Notably, the federal government and the SNNPRS held two statehood referendums, which led to the establishment of the Sidama National Regional State in 2020 and the South West Ethiopia Peoples' Regional State<sup>46</sup> in 2022 (Tadesse, 2023).

Another important political element driving the quest for regional statehood is a lack of inclusive power-sharing and political representation at the regional and federal levels (AAU/Staff01; LCPC01; Tronvoll, Boroje, & Tezera, 2020). At the regional level, power has been held in the hands of a few ethnic groups; in terms of representation, the executive body of the regional administration has been comprised overwhelmingly of individuals from one or two ethnic groups. Since the inception of the SNNPRS – and except at the time that Hailemariam Desalegn (Wolayta) and Ristu Yerdaw (Gurage) were in office – all the regional administrators of the SNNPRS were from Sidama (Tadesse, 2023). Conversely, ethnic groups on the periphery were excluded from the power-sharing arrangement (HoF01; HoF02; HoF03; CFG/PhDS01).

Study informants suggested that a range of other political factors are also at work. At one level, the demand for regional statehood appears to have been fuelled by poor administration, lack of rule of law, and a lack of accountability (HoF01; PSI01; PSI02; AAU/Staff01; CFG/PhDS01; LCPC01). At another level, it was said that, in view of the benefits that accrue to an ethnic group when it establishes its own regional state, local elites may be motivated by ambition and a desire for material and non-material gain. The attainment of regional statehood stands to elevate them in status and power from zonal-level to regional-level political players, in the process according them greater privilege and authority. Competition for having a regional capital of one's own is another, and related, political factor which has been fostering ambitions for securing regional statehood.

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46 This new regional state was formed by applying the cluster formula and merging Konta Special Woreda and the zones of Bench Sheko, Sheka, Kaffa, West Omo, and Dawro.



### 7.3 Constitutional factors

The quest for regional statehood is constitutionally valid, as can be confirmed by an examination of the FDRE Constitution. The latter, at a minimum, does not oppose any demand by the nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia to form autonomous regions; indeed, under Article 47(2), they have the right to establish, at any time, their own states. In terms of Article 47(3) (a)–(e), there are procedural requirements for doing so, but these do not overrule the right per se to establish such states. Consequently, as noted, it has been within the bounds of constitutionality for zones in the SNNPRS – in this instance, nearly all of them – to mobilise claims for their own regional states following the transition of 2018 and the establishment of the Sidama state (Shiferaw, 2019).

Nevertheless, even though the Constitution guarantees all nations, nationalities, and peoples the unconditional right to form regional states, the federal government’s evident lack of political will to make timely and responsive decisions in this regard diminishes the efficacy of these provisions in practice. Irrespective of whether claims for regional statehood are well founded (Tilahun et al., 2020) and in accord with the Constitution, the response is determined mostly by the political needs and agenda of the incumbent government (FoF01). The experience of the quest for regional statehood in the SNNPRS, when seen in comparison with other regions in terms of population and geographical size, indicates that the federal government selectively provides regional statehood for some while denying it for others, depending on the will of the ruling party (Aalen, 2011). In this respect, informants argued that the Constitution lacks appropriate requirements and procedures concerning the way in which quests for regional statehood are entertained (HoF01; HoF02; HoF03; PSI01; CFG/PhDS01; LCPC01).

### 7.4 Historical factors

Following a deadly struggle with Emperor Menelik II, numerous sovereign kingdoms in southern Ethiopia were integrated into the Ethiopian empire. Territorial expansion into the southern and western areas of Ethiopia enabled Menelik to establish a strong centralised administration, despite resistance by the kingdoms of Wolaita and Keffa (Zewde, 2005). Ethnic groups in the south were compelled to accept the culture of the dominant ethnic groups and relinquish their own. In the process, too, the self-rule traditions of southern Ethiopia were eliminated (Green, 2018).

Menelik’s centralisation initiative was reinforced under Haile Selassie I and, later, by the military regime that came to power in 1974 and which was eventually overthrown by unified multinational forces near the close of the 20th century (Fiseha, 2005). After the downfall of the military regime in 1991, a transitional government set about converting a centralised system of governance into a decentralised one. Proclamation No.7/1992 of the TGE established 14 regional states, but in time five of them were amalgamated into the multi-ethnic SNNPRS. The resultant nine states were organised hierarchically into zones, woredas, special woredas, and kebeles (Asnake, 2013).

This snapshot sets out the broad facts of the historical context in which quests

of regional statehood are undertaken and on which many of them draw for their legitimation. As the earlier discussion of the Wolayta suggests, such quests are often linked not only to contemporary socio-cultural factors but to the deeper historical legacies that, in fact or in assertion, underlie them. A survey by Tilahun et al. (2020) found that demands for statehood are invariably premised on historical considerations relating to the formation and reformation of the Ethiopian state or, even earlier than that, to conditions said to have prevailed in the pre-Menelik era. The authors found that, as with the Wolayta, respondents from zones such as Kaffa, Gedeo, and Dawuro claimed that their respective communities had been autonomous polities before they were incorporated into the Ethiopian state by Emperor Menelik.

## 8. Is the cluster formula viable?

Following the massive quest for statehood in the SNNPRS since 2018, the cluster formula has been proposed as a solution, albeit that there are differences of opinion on the matter. On the one hand, it is believed that the main purpose of the formula is to bring together the SNNPRS's different ethnic groups, facilitate service delivery, and ensure a fair allocation of power and resources among the nationalities of the region. Indeed, the proposed arrangement would seem to be reasonable if it is the case that those zones which are adjacent to each other and have similar linguistic and cultural features are arranged together, and if this is based on consent. Moreover, the arrangement could be seen as a compromise strategy, particularly for addressing the central problem of economic viability (HoF01; HoF 02; HoF03). Commenting in the media, the noted academic Keyredin Tezera (cited in Berhane, 2022), spoke of the formula with tentative approval:

I think it's a step in the right direction, but caution should be exercised to avoid making the same mistake as [in the] SNNPR, which is now being dismantled due to growing resentment over resource-sharing, political participation, and infrastructure development.

On the other hand, critics of the cluster formula maintain that it is a top-down imposition and that the public were not given an opportunity to engage with it. Zones within the SNNPRS have been particularly vocal in their criticism, as noted earlier. According to Tilahun et al. (2020), the first preference of the zones is to form their own regional state, whereas forming regions with others (the basis of the cluster formula) is merely their second.

Despite opposition to the cluster formula, some consider it as a promising solution (HoF01). It has been noted in this regard, for instance, that in 2022 the South West Ethiopia Peoples' Regional State was established on this very basis (Addis Standard, 2022a). It would thus seem crucial to assess the viability of the cluster formula as a means of addressing the quest for regional statehood. The question, then, is: Is the cluster formula viable?

Apparently the result of elite bargaining, the cluster formula is based on the belief that it would serve to pool resources and strengthen those regional states established via clustering. The cluster arrangement is not provided for in the Constitution, as key informants pointed out; however, the view was that

if were based on popular and political consensus, it could be a promising and economically viable option. The economic viability of cluster formula should be seen as a legitimate from both the zone that claim and the central government. It is argued that, taking budgetary constraints into account, the cluster formula is a viable response to the growing demand for autonomous regional statehood if the zones support the idea of cluster (PSI01; PSI02; HoF01; HoF02; HoF03; SFPL01).

Given that some justifications for demanding regional statehood relate to imbalances in economic and infrastructural development, inequitable distribution of national resources, and lack of quality service delivery, is the cluster formula a guarantee that such disparities among the zones would be reversed? Respondents maintained in reply that, under this arrangement, the pooling of resources could increase the capacity of the regional states so formed to harness these resources for inclusive development (HoF01; HoF02; HoF03). Even though key informants shared common arguments regarding the economic viability of the cluster formula, there are questions about its practicality. There is a lack of agreement among the zones in deciding on the regional capital, which is an indicator of divergent interests among the zones to be clustered. Accordingly, competing interest on regional center is one of the reasons why the zones insist on quest for regional statehood that would not be sought if the zonal center is chosen (SFPL01). For example, contestation over the selection of the regional state capital in the newly created South West Ethiopia Peoples' Regional State was addressed by forming four regional centres, namely Bonga (the political centre), Tepi (the seat of the region's nations council), Mizan Aman (judicial centre), and Tercha (the seat of the regional council) (Addis Standard, 2022b). However, this has resulted in the fragmentation of government services and made the accessibility of public service difficult. Moreover, one of the challenges of the cluster arrangement is the huge administrative cost of having multiple centres of regional administration (HoF01; HoF02; HoF03; AAU/Staff01).

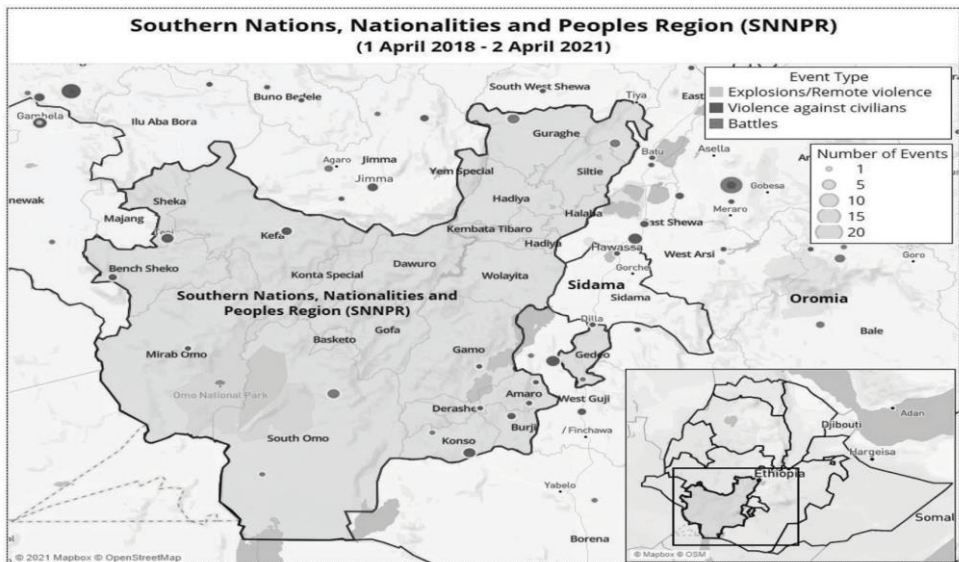
The preferences of the zones are another obstacle to the practicality of the cluster formality. In the study by Tilahun et al. (2020), respondents from 14 zones were asked to rank four options in order of preference: "1, forming an autonomous independent regional state; 2, forming a regional state shared with others; 3, forming a state structure that existed during the transitional government, or 4, to remain in the existing SNNPR structure" (p. 18). Option 1 was the first preference of the majority of respondents, and option 2, the second. However, the challenge in this regard is that some zones prefer clustering with a distant zone rather than a neighbouring one due to political animosities with the latter. Dawro, for example, prefers to be clustered with any other zone than Wolaytta thanks to their historical grievances (PSI01; AAU/Staff01, Tilahun et al., 2020).

Certain zones continue to oppose the cluster formula and persist in their claim for autonomous regional statehood. Borkena Ethiopian News (2023) reported that the opposition revealed simmering resentment among localities that are dissatisfied with the proposed new administrative structures. Residents in the Gamo zone, for example, have reported displeasure, but have not been permitted to take to the streets in protest. Gurage, as previously stated, has been protesting for over a year (at the time of writing), seeking an ethnic Gurage re-

gional state. Geographic inconvenience is also a challenge for the practicality of the cluster formula, particularly so in the case of the Gedeo zone given its complete separation from the rest of zones to be clustered (see Map 1); in this regard, the cluster proposal is certainly not an optimal solution for it.

Moreover, there has been strong resistance to the cluster formula in the SNN-PRS, with several zones insisting on forming their own regional states. For instance, the Gurage zonal council rejected it, with 52 votes against and 40 votes in favour (Negari TV, 2022). The federal government has attempted nevertheless to persuade the Gurage to form a regional state with other zones under the cluster formula. During a visit to Wolkite (the town of Gurage zoze), the Prime Minister made his position clear, saying, “I believe that the Shewan cluster is beneficial to Gurage” (Ethiopian News Agency, 2023). Such a high-profile exercise in public relations is, if anything, a sure sign that the cluster formula is indeed the product of a top-down approach to regional-state formation.

Figure 1: Map of Southern Nation Nationalities and Peoples Regional State



Source: Ethiopia Peace Observatory (2023)

## 9. Conclusion

The Ethiopian federation has recently struggled with rising demands for regional statehood. This particularly critical problem comes in the wake of the country’s political transition in 2018, one of the consequences of which has been that the quest for autonomous regional statehood in the SNNPRS has reached a crescendo, with all of its zones initially demanding regional statehood.

The TGE’s amalgamation of five regions into the single entity of the SNNPRS was politically motivated and aimed at counterbalancing internal and external factors such as pressure from regions dominant in national politics and the growth of opposition parties in southern Ethiopia. The formation of the SNN-PRS lacked popular support and reflected a top-down approach to accommodating ethno-nationalism, with opposition to it either stifled by ruling-party

politicking or simply quelled by force. Such an approach was commonplace under the former EPRDF, yet it remains in evidence to this day in the official response to the pressing issues to have emerged in the SNNPRS, with the cluster formula proposed as solution to the growing demand for regional statehood. What this shows is that, since the inception of federalism in Ethiopia, questions of self-determination and regional-state formation have been addressed on the basis of what serves the interests of the central government. In other words, what matters is neither a constitutional and legal framework, nor popular views or interests, but the interests of the ruling elites.

Political exclusion at the federal, regional, and local levels, poor infrastructural facilities, poor and unresponsive public service delivery, and the FDRE Constitution's unconditional provision for self-determination have contributed to the increasing demand for regional statehood in the SNNPRS. A cluster arrangement has been suggested as a remedy to deal with the proliferation of quests for statehood, yet it fails to fully capture the realities on the making it contentious as a vehicle for restructuring regional statehood. Issues such as zonal preferences for autonomous region, the constitutionality of the cluster formula, the competition between zones regarding regional centres, administrative inconvenience, and mistrust and grievances between adjacent zones pose challenges to the feasibility and sustainability of the cluster formula.

It would seem that there is a constitutional loophole in addressing the demand for regional statehood. The FDRE Constitution lacks substantive and objective criteria for dealing effectively with the increasing quest for regional statehood. This in turn implies that the nationalities question and issue of self-determination remain as sources of political crisis in the country. Furthermore, the constitutional clauses that unequivocally provide for the right to self-determination, including secession, present a significant challenge to the application of the cluster formula. The legal and practical barrier to implementing the cluster formula is the lack of suitable substantive and objective criteria under which regional states may be structured or restructured. The contradiction here is that the Constitution guarantees the right to self-determination, yet the cluster formula inhibits this. The federal government's conviction in applying the cluster formula suggests a shift in focus from prioritising unconditional self-rule and self-determination to prioritising considerations of economic viability, which would contradict constitutional provisions and threaten the democratic rights of the concerned ethnic groups.

The findings of this study thus underline that a balanced response to the quest for regional statehood, along with efforts to ensure social, political, economic, and infrastructural development in the region and throughout the country, is vital to ensuring peace, stability, and economic progress. Moreover, the federal government should consider arguments other than economic ones – such as popular interests and administrative convenience, for instance – in making rational decisions regarding the quest for regional statehood. It is also recommended that, in order to impose limits on the central government's monopolisation of power when it comes to structuring and restructuring regional states, the FDRE Constitution be amended in regard to the formation of new regional states by specifying criteria such as administrative convenience, economic viability, and population-size thresholds. Finally, to ensure the exercise

of self-determination and self-rule at the sub-regional level as well as equitable local-level development and resource distribution, the federation should be restructured into three levels of government, with the federal constitution recognising local government's autonomy.

## 10. Limitations of the study

A limitation of this research is that the data used for analysis were not collected directly at grass-roots level. However, a survey conducted under the auspices of the Policy Research Institute (PSI) and authored by Tilahun et al. (2020) was used to fill this gap to an extent. In addition, the quest for regional statehood in the SNNPRS is a complex, multifaceted, and dynamically evolving issue amenable to analysis from an infinity of perspectives. As such, producing a final, totalising account of this ongoing phenomenon is both a theoretical and practical impossibility.

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