

# THE FORMATION OF ETHIOPIA'S FEDERATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AMHARAS' QUEST FOR RECOGNITION AND BOUNDARY DEMARCATIONS

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**Abstract:** Federations are structural arrangements with the tenets of shared rule and self-rule. These federations may be formed through coming-together, holding-together, or putting-together processes. This article aims to situate Ethiopia in one of these three variants and examine its implications for the Amharas' quest for boundary demarcations and equal recognition in other regions. The data were collected through interviews and document analysis. Accordingly, the article argues that Ethiopia is a putting-together federation because of major flaws committed during the transition. The putting-together federation left ethnic groups such as the Amhara without protection by regional constitutions. It also led to the sanctioning of boundary demarcations that contradicts the criteria listed under the federal constitution. Hence, it is recommended to restructure the federation through democratic bargaining.

**Keywords:** *putting-together federation, ethnic federalism, Amhara, politics of recognition, Ethiopia's federalism*

## Introduction

Federalism, as a “programmatically orientation,” advances a “multi-tiered government, which combines elements of shared-rule through common institutions for some purposes and regional self-rule for constituent units for some other purposes” (Assefa 2006: 110). Federations are systems of governments or polities in which the decision-making power is divided between central and regional governments (Taylor 2007). Since William Riker's 1964 work, the formation of federations has been at the centre of intellectual debate. Federations are seen as democracies that are created either through the integration of independent states or the devolution of power

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to sub-national units (Burgess 2006). However, Alfred Stepan (2001), who saw limitations in such classification, identified three types of federations: coming-together, holding-together and putting-together federations. Coming-together federations are formed when power is *aggregated* through the voluntary agreement of independent polities characterised by a sense of sovereignty and identity (Wondwosen and Záhóřik 2008). Holding-together federations are created when a deal is made and power is *devolved* to different constituent units in a unitary state (Stepan 2001). These federations are established through a democratic dialogue meant to curtail separatist tendencies in a unitary state (Stepan 2001). The third type, putting-together federations, is formed through devolution of power, like holding-together federations (Asnake 2009). However, these federations are established through *coercive* procedures without democratic bargaining among the actors concerned (Stepan 2001).

Ethiopia, which had long been a unitary state, was restructured as an ethnic federal state in 1991 by “accommodating ethnicity as a formal political element” (Abbink 2011: 597). Ethnic federalism was preferred to address the perceived grievances of various ethnic groups who were rallying behind the nationalities question (Asnake 2009). Although there is a consensus on the reasons for the origin of Ethiopia’s federation, it is debatable to situate it in one of the three types mentioned. On the one hand, some politicians and academicians argue that the federal formation is democratic and inclusive (Andreas 2003; Assefa 2006). Hence, they use both coming-together (Andreas 2003) and holding-together (Assefa 2006) processes to explain the formation of Ethiopia’s federation. Assefa’s (2006) holding-together is even endorsed by the school curricula through civic and ethical education common courses given for all freshman students of the universities in the country. Speakers and writers in the other camp argue that Ethiopia’s federal formation did not result from a democratic bargaining, while ongoing problems of the country are attributed to flaws in the formation of the federation (Million 2018). These people argue that the transitional activities and the final federal pact came into effect by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF)/the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).<sup>1</sup> Given the theoretical

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1 The Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) is the governing coalition constituted by four ethnic parties: the TPLF, the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP, former OPDO), the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP, former ANDM) and the Southern Ethiopia People’s Democratic Movement (SEPDM) which represents Tigray, Oromo, Amhara and Southern

bases and the stated contentions, the present article tries to examine and situate Ethiopia's federation in one of the three types of federation.

Moreover, although an ethnic-based federal arrangement is preferred to ensure the equality of nations, nationalities and peoples in the country as a whole, ethnic minorities such as the Amhara,<sup>2</sup> who are predominantly living outside of "their" ethnic-based administrative unit, claim that ethnic-based exclusions and marginalisations are being continued. Authors such as Abbink (2011) report that a hierarchy of ethnicities exists at the sub-state levels. However, others such as Birhanie (2017) argue that the EPRDF ensures the equality of nations, nationalities and people of Ethiopia through differential politics of recognition. Therefore, this article examines the politics of recognition employed in the Oromia region, the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State (BGRS) and the Harar region in respect to Amharas living in these regions.<sup>3</sup> In addition, border tensions such as Amhara vs. Tigray, Amhara vs. Benshangul-Gumuz, Oromia vs. Somalia, Afar vs. Somalia and the like are very common in the country (Abbink 2006). Among others, the Amhara quest of restoring boundaries is deep-rooted, an issue undertaken by organising boundary and identity restoration committees. This question of Amhara recognition will also be examined by discussing the case of Pawe district.

Thus, the general objective of the present article is to situate Ethiopia's federation in one of these three types and examine its implications for the people's recurrent requests for equal political recognition and the restoration of boundaries with a focus on Amhara. Specifically, it aims to (1) examine the major transitional activities *vis-à-vis* the principles of democratic bargaining; (2) situate Ethiopia's federalism in one of Stepan's three types of federation; (3) examine Amhara's quest for equal politics of recognition in other regions in line with the process of the federal formation; and (4) analyse the Amharas' claims of boundary restorations in the light of the federal formation processes.

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People, respectively. However, the TPLF, which represents the Tigray people that constitute six percent of the country's population, was the mastermind of EPRDF (Asnake 2009).

2 Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) is one of the nine regions created as a "home" region of the Amhara people although many Amharas are living outside of "their" region.

3 In the present article, the terms region, sub-state unit and sub-national unit are used interchangeably to refer to constituent units of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

## **Theoretical Arguments on the Formation of Federations**

Federations are created in different manners and for different objectives. These “why” and “how” questions in the formation of federations are, thus, bases of intellectual debate in the study of federations, even though much attention is given to the why questions (Burgess 2006). William Riker (1964), who was one of the influential contributors to the intellectual debate, argues that federations are formed for military or security purposes (cited in Taylor 2007). However, economic factors were also acknowledged as one of the motives for the formation of federations (Burgess 2006). In addition to the cause, the manner how federations are formed is the main issue of concern in the intellectual debate. Based on his analysis of older federations such as the USA, Riker (1964) argued that federations are formed through political bargains conducted among political elites of independent states (see also Asnake 2009). In this case, federations resulted from a bargaining undertaken between two or more independent political entities. Stepan (2001) named these coming-together federations, which are formed when individual polities characterised by a sense of sovereignty and identity join similar polities for mutual gains (Stepan 2001). In such federations, the actors agree to aggregate their resources and surrender some of their rights while maintaining autonomy on other issues (Stepan 2001). The constitution, which is the covenant of the actors, resulted from “a series of bargains, agreements and compromises emanating from the interaction of political elites” (Burgess 2006: 176).

Coming-together federations are typical of federations proposed by Riker (Burgess 2006). However, Riker’s theoretical view on the formation of federations has been criticised as it lacks the ability to explain emerging federations in Asia and Africa. Authors reviewing Riker’s propositions with reference to developments in Nigeria, India, Malaysia and other states, expanded the conditions for the origin of federations by including two factors: (1) the desire to deter internal threats and (2) the willingness to have them deterred (Burgess 2006). In this sense, federations are sought to be institutional arrangements to deter internal threats, such as secession and disintegration, by devolving power from a formerly unitary state to the different ethno-cultural units (Wondwosen and Záhorský 2008).

Based on his analysis of multiethnic federations in Asia, Michael Breen (2017: 28) argues that “in each case, nation-building has been based on the dominant group’s identity, to the exclusion of smaller ethnic groups and hence federalism comes to be the preferred means of accommodation and to overcome the legacies of historical discrimination and exclusion.” Such federations are formed through the devolution of power from the centre to the constituent units for the purpose of balancing the interest of centrifugal and centripetal forces – unlike Rikerian federations, which are formed through the union of independent states. Hence, unlike the coming-together federation, formed through the integration of independent units, holding-together federations are formed through the devolution of power in order to manage centrifugal tendencies.

While Breen (2017) calls all such formations holding-together federations by taking the devolution of power as a criterion, Stepan (2001) adds democratic bargaining and makes a distinction between holding-together and putting-together federations. Hence, holding-together federations are democratic federations that are formed when a deal is made and an agreement is reached in a unitary state, constituted by multiple ethnicities or other forms of cultural groups, in order to preserve the national state (Stepan 2001). In this process, the different political forces are expected to reach a *consensus* on the main foundations of the federation. This type of federation is established to “maintain a unity of states by establishing a multi-ethnic federal system largely to avoid or settle ethnic, regional and other types of group conflict” (Wondwosen and Záhorkík 2008: 4).

Both the coming-together and the holding-together federations have a common feature of democratic bargaining and they are genuine federations. For some, federations that are not based on the principles of democratic bargaining are not even federations. For instance, for Michael Burges (2006: 98), “federations are voluntary unions based firmly upon *liberal democratic notions* of constitutional government” and hence “coercive unions such as the old Soviet Union, Argentina, Brazil and Nigeria shall be ruled out from the list of federations when they suffered intermittent periods of military government.” By contrast, principles of democratic bargaining such as equality, inclusiveness, consensus, and representations are crucial ideals in the establishment of holding-together and coming-together federations (Stepan 2001).

However, the equation of federations with democracy is not found to be satisfactory for explaining federations that have undemocratic features. But, as Edward Freeman (1893, cited in Burges 2006: 13) stated, “federal governments can be democratic or undemocratic.” Similarly, Graham Smith (1995, paraphrased in Aalen 2002: 17) pointed out that “it is important to acknowledge that federal projects might take a variety of forms which cannot be simply equated with late modern democracies.” Accordingly, Stepan (2001), aspiring to deconstruct the notion that equates federations with democracies, identified a third variant: putting-together federation. Putting-together federations are established through the devolution of power, just like holding-together federations (Asnake 2009). However, unlike holding-together federations, which are formed through democratic bargaining, putting-together federations are established through coercive efforts (Stepan 2001). Putting-together federations, “like the former Soviet Union, are established through a heavily coercive effort by a non-democratic centralizing power to put together different ethnic groups within a multinational state” (Stepan 2001: 322). In this type of federation, principles such as equality, inclusiveness, genuine representation, consensus, and impartiality are generally not given due attention.

Such a type of federation was evident in the formation of the Russian federation. Brian Taylor, who studied the Russian federation, wrote that “the critical role of force in the federal bargain was evident in the very manner in which the 1993 constitution of Russia was adopted” (Taylor 2007: 421). The Russian federation and its legal foundation, the constitution, were imposed by President Yeltsin through coercive measures without consented deliberations with its oppositions in the parliament (Taylor 2007). “Control over the army, police, and secret police was fundamental to Yeltsin’s victory in this showdown ... and the constitutional framework for Russian federalism was largely imposed by Yeltsin” (Taylor 2007: 427). In putting-together federations, the winning/dominant group decides the formation of the federation, the contents of the federal pact, the criteria for internal boundary demarcations and all other issues. Their implementations are also handled through coercive procedures (Stepan 2001).

## Theorizing Ethnicity

According to Philip Yang (2000), ethnicity is a subjective sense of collective belonging, which can be based on objective characteristics such as physical attributes, presumed ancestry, common descent, history, culture, national origin (or a combination of these). Because of varied and even antagonistic interpretations of ethnicity, three main theories of ethnicity can be identified: (1) Primordialism, which argues that ethnicity is something given at birth and transcends through the kin-and-clan-structure of human society, and thus is relatively static; (2) Constructivism, which argues that ethnicity is a socially constructed identity; and (3) Instrumentalism, which argues that ethnicity and ethnic membership is constructed for the purpose of gaining comparative advantages and hence a rationally chosen identity (Yang 2000: 39–47). However, due to the “varying degree of validity and limitation of these theories to explain the nature and basis of ethnicity” (Yang 2000: 47), Yang developed an “integrated approach.” Based on this approach, “ethnicity is socially constructed partly on the basis of ancestry or presumed ancestry; and more importantly by society; that the interest of the ethnic group also influences ethnic affiliation; and that ethnic boundaries are relatively stable but undergo through changes” (Yang 2000: 48).

Following the radicalisation of ethnic politics in Ethiopia since the 1960s, various scholars use different theories for explaining the nature and basis of ethnicity in this country. The study of Dereje Feyissa (2003), titled “Ethnic Groups and Conflict: the Case of Anywaa-Nuer Relations in the Gambella Region,” used both primordial and constructivist approaches to explain ethnicity in Gambella, Ethiopia. Berhanu Balcha (2007) also approached ethnicity based on primordial and instrumental theses in his study titled “Restructuring State and Society: Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia.” Joshua Lincoln (2000) utilised all three perspectives in his study “The Effect of Federalism on Intergroup Relations in Multiethnic States: Evidence from Nigeria and Ethiopia” and argues that “the three theories are complimentary rather than mutually exclusive” (Lincoln 2000: 54). In understanding the basis and essence of the Amhara ethnic group, Christopher Clapham (1988) also adopted a constructivist approach when he wrote that “being Amhara is much more a matter of how one behaves than of who one’s parents were” (Clapham 1988: 24). Likewise, Michael Mackonen (2008: 404) in his article “Who is Amhara?” used a constructivist approach in defining the Amhara.

For him “a person who is an Amhara by birth may not subscribe to Amhara identity and the Amhara nationalist consciousness and thus Amhara identity can be defined from the ethnic perspective at the level of consciousness.”

The present article finds both primordial and constructivist convincing theses for approaching ethnicity in respect to the Amhara. Membership of the Amhara group is constructed partly on the basis of ancestry, or *presumed ancestry*, and partly explained in terms of social construction. Jonathan Sarna’s “theory of ethnicization” (1978) in particular, one version of constructivism, has more explanatory value for the construction of Amhara’s identity. Sarna (1978, cited in Yang 2000: 45) argues that “ethnicity is created by ascriptions – assignment of an individual to a particular ethnic group by outsiders such as government, churches, schools, media ... and adversity – prejudice, discrimination, hostility and hardship, that force a member of the same group to unite, and helps create a group identity and solidarity.” The ascriptions made by the post-1991 government and adversaries regarding the eviction and killing of and prejudice against so-called Amhara in various parts of the country, such as Arba Gugu, Bedeno, Asebot, Gurafarda, Assoa, etc. (Bekalu 2018; see also Abbink 2006), have contributed to the development of Amharan ethnic consciousness. Hence, both the primordial and the constructivist theories are crucial to approach identification in the Amhara ethnic group.

### ***The Genesis of Ethiopia’s Ethnic Federalism***

Ethiopia is one of the ancient countries with a long history of independent statehood. The modern Ethiopian state emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century with the ascension of Tewodros II to the throne (1855). From this time on, successive Ethiopian leaders were eager to create a unified Ethiopia. Minelick II successfully undertook a series of military conquests and peaceful submission strategies (Assefa 2006), or “colonial” expansions as some Oromo authors call it (Mekuria 2005: 8), to unify the state. Indeed, his legacy is the emergence of Ethiopia in its present geographical shape and ethnic makeup. Successive rulers attempted to consolidate the nation-building process through an assimilation policy, in which the Amharic language and Amhara culture were considered to be mainstream/national identity (Assefa 2006; Mekuria 2005).



However, this process has been criticised for rejecting the multiethnic nature of the state (Gudina 2007). As a result, “Ethiopian students started to use Stalinist theory of nationalities to narrate problems of ethnic relations in Ethiopia” (Asnake 2009: 63). Since the early 1960s, the imperial government had to face opposition from increasingly radicalised students who rallied behind land to the tiller, and the nationalities’ question (Asnake 2009). Along with this, several organisations were created to liberate their respective ethnic groups from “colonialism” or suppression (Balcha 2007). Ethno-nationalist groups such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) claim that Abyssinia (the historic core of the Ethiopian polity) colonised roughly half the territories and peoples (Habtu 2003). Similarly, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) was claiming that all miseries faced by the Tigray people were due to deliberate actions of Amharan rule (Balcha 2007: 65). Hence, their struggle was to end Amhara domination (Assefa 2006) or seek liberation from Abyssinian “colonialism” (Gudina 2007; Mekuria 2005).

With such political narratives, ethno-nationalist and multinational forces were established and continued their struggle against the *Dergue* regime.<sup>4</sup> Although there were many political movements, the most dominant were the Eritrean People Liberation Front (EPLF), the TPLF and the OLF (Kidane 2007). Along with multinational forces such as the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (AESM), the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU), these fronts undertook an armed struggle against the *Dergue* regime, which was removed from power in 1991 (Asnake 2009). Following the overthrow of the *Dergue* regime, the winners, led by the TPLF, restructured the country as a federal state “to meet the presumed ethno-regional grievances of the various groups (especially their elites) in Ethiopia” (Abbink 2009: 10).

## Methods and Materials

In this article I seek to examine the process through which Ethiopia’s federation was created and to analyze the implication of this process for the recurrent questions in relation to the restoration of boundaries and to the politics of equal recognition. For this purpose, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews

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4 *Dergue* is an Amharic term, which refers to Ethiopia’s military committee, a regime that came to power following the overthrow of the imperial regime in 1974.

were preferred because of their ability to obtain detailed information about particular events, their capability to produce focused data, and their potential to elicit information from few participants (Matthews and Ross 2010). The interview partners were chosen through the intensity sampling method.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, interviewees were recruited from three broad categories: officials from the government and its constituent parties, officials from opposition parties, and academic scholars.

From the first category, one official from the federal House of Federation, two officials from the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State (BGRS), two officials from the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), and one official from the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP, former OPDO) were chosen on the basis of their familiarity with the issues involved. From the opposition political parties, two officials were chosen from the National Movement of Amhara (NaMA), two former officials from the All Amhara People's Organization (AAPO), one from the EPRP, and two officials from the Ethiopian Federal Democratic Unity Forum-aka-*Medrek*. From the third group, four academicians from Addis Ababa, Bahirdar and Gondar universities were interviewed.

Accordingly, a total of 17 interviews were conducted to collect data. The interviews were held in January and February 2019. Each interview lasted an hour on average. Regarding research ethics, consent was obtained from each interviewee. Moreover, their names are kept anonymous in the analysis in order to protect their security. In addition to these face-to-face semi-structured interviews, the article benefited from the ideas of Lencho Leta (active participant during the transition through his party OLF), whose interviews are archived at the websites of various media. Moreover, the article uses published research, reports of human rights organisations and of the Ethiopian Central Statistical Agency (CSA) as well as media archives. Thematic analysis supported by descriptive statistics was used to analyse the data.

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5 Intensity sampling is a purposive sampling technique that selects participants based on their capacity of generating intense information because of their familiarity with the issue (Matthews and Ross 2010).

## **The Formation of Ethiopia's Federation**

Following the overthrow of the *Dergue* regime from power, Ethiopia was restructured as a federal state, dominantly by the TPLF/EPRDF and the OLF – at least for a year (Aalen 2002). Accordingly, the country was divided into fourteen constituent units, which later were reduced to nine regions based on language, ethnicity, settlement patterns and the willingness of the people (FDRE Constitution 1995: art. 46). However, language and ethnic identity were the main criteria for internal boundary demarcations (Abbink 2006). The TPLF/EPRDF, which controlled the power following the withdrawal of the OLF from the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) in 1992, was the main force behind the making and unmaking of the federation (Abbink 2011; Gudina 2007). As a result, this article argues that Ethiopia's federation did *not* result from democratic bargaining and hence best fits Stepan's *putting-together* variant. In the following section, the main arguments are presented which justify why Ethiopia's federation has to be identified as a putting-together federation.

### ***Exclusion of Contending Political Parties from the Peace Conference***

The restructuring process was begun by the July 1991 Peace and Democracy Conference in Addis Ababa (preceded by the London conference). This conference was the base for the adoption of the Transitional Charter through which the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) was established. As such, the inclusion and participation of political movements with different political positions would have been crucial if the federation was to be established through a *genuine federal bargain*. However, major contending political organisations were excluded from the Peace Conference (interviewee from EPRP, 26 January 2019, Addis Ababa). The main excluded political organisations were the EPRP, the AESM, and other members of the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (COEDF) (Kidane 2007).

One interviewee argued that these political parties were excluded from the process because they were unwilling to renounce their military struggle (interviewee from ADP, 04 January 2019, Bahirdar). Another interviewee stated that these political parties were excluded because their political orientation was far from the EPRDF's position about the rights of nations, nationalities and people of Ethiopia (interviewee from EFDUF, 24 January

2019, Addis Ababa). In relation to this, Aalen (2002: 6) ascertained that “individuals or movements which had been affiliated with Mengistu’s WPE or organizations with a non-ethnic base (like the EPRP) were excluded.” Alemante (1992) also showed that these political parties were excluded as their political program disagreed with the EPRDF’s political and constitutional preferences.

According to interviews with an academician at Addis Ababa University and with a higher official in the EFDUF, the parties who attended the conference, and later became part of the TGE, were weak parties that could not bargain with the TPLF/EPRDF. Thus, the conference was not accommodative to competent political parties, while it was open to weak parties that were easily manipulated by the then dominant party. If competent political parties had been allowed to take part and the conference would have been conducted among equals, it would not have concluded with the adoption of the TPLF’s political program as a Transitional Charter. In relation to this, Aalen (2002: 6) writes that “The Transitional Charter, which worked as an interim constitution, adopted EPRDF/TPLF’s ideas largely unmodified, although the OLF played an important part in shaping the document.” Moreover, its exclusionary practices allowed the TPLF/EPRDF to secure the largest number of seats in the unelected Council of Representatives of the TGE (interviewee from EFDUF, 24 January 2019, Addis Ababa). The “EPRDF controlled 32 seats while its ‘junior partner’, OLF secured 12 seats out of 87 total seats” (Kidane 2007: 81). The TPLF/EPRDF also controlled key executive powers of the TGE, which was one of the reasons that led to a quarrel with the OLF (interviewee from EFDUF, 24 January 2019, Addis Ababa). Generally, when one carefully examines the admission criteria for the conference, the actors who prepared and controlled the conference, the agenda setting process, and the earlier arrangements for the conference, it can convincingly be concluded that the peace and democracy conference was not inclusive. This stands in striking contrast to the fact that inclusiveness was and is one of the essential prerequisites in the formation of federations.

### ***Controversies on the Involvement of Amhara in the Restructuring Process***

While different (or at least the main) ethnic groups were represented by different organisations, one interviewee claimed that Amhara was not duly represented during the restructuring process and hence the federation is not legitimate (interviewee from NaMA, 15 January 2019, *Bahirdar*). This political narrative is firmly held by the Amhara-based opposition party, NaMA. Interviewees from ADP also share the idea that “there has to be constitutional modification and restructuring of the federation for the reason that Amhara’s interests were not duly articulated and entertained during the transition” (interviewee from ADP, 4 January 2019, *Bahirdar*). In spite of the fact that there was no ethnic-based political party that could represent the Amhara, the arguments that there were no Amharas in the process is not convincing in itself, because many Amharas participated in the process as members of the Ethiopian People Democratic Movement (EPDM) (interviewee from ODP, 19 January 2019, Addis Ababa). However, since the EPDM was a multinational party, its struggle to articulate and defend the interests of Amhara, as compared to other ethnic-based political parties, was negligible (interviewee from ADP, 4 January 2019, *Bahirdar*).

The participation of Amhara in the restructuring process was essential, not only for its large numerical size (as Amharas are the second largest group of Ethiopia) but also for it being the main group that played a significant role in the state- and nation-building process of Ethiopia (Levine 1974). According to Kidane (2007: 81), “three identities: the Oromo, Amhara, and Tigray are the most predominant, and success of the federal arrangement is likely to, largely but not exclusively, hinge on the configuration of power among the elites of these three identities” (Kidane 2007: 81). However, although Amharas were part of the process through the EPDM, they were not as strong as the ethnic-based parties in articulating the interests and positions of the Amhara (interviewee from ADP, 16 January 2019, *Bahirdar*). This gave the ethnic-based parties an opportunity to determine the principles of the restructuring process in the absence of an equivalent ethnic-based political movement that could represent the Amharas. The main recurrent questions against the boundary demarcation, the politics of recognition and the narrative of titular versus non-titular classifications that made Amhara a victim (although it also affects other minorities) were framed in its “absence.”

Being cognizant of this problem, the All Amhara People's Organization (AAPO) was established to articulate the interests of Amhara (Barder 1999). However, as was common to other opposition political parties, the TPLF/EPRDF was intimidating, arresting, harassing and killing the leaders, members and supporters of this party (Amnesty International 1994). Soon after its foundation in January 1992, several officials of AAPO, including the chairperson Professor Asrat Woldeyes, were arrested (Amnesty International 1994). According to the report of the Immigration and Refugees Board of Canada (1996), from a total of fourteen executive Committee members of the party, twelve were arrested between 1993 and 1995. Moreover, around 2,000 supporters and members of the party were arrested the same period (Amnesty International 1994). Due to such inconveniencies, it was difficult for the Amharas to articulate their interests and positions in the restructuring process of Ethiopia (interviewee from NaMA, 18 January 2019, *Bahirdar*). In this context, the EPDM, a multinational party affiliated to the TPLF, was changed into the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM, the current ADP) in 1994 (interviewee from ADP, 4 January 2019, *Bahirdar*). These facts demonstrate how the federation was restructured in a manner so that opposition political organisations claiming to represent the Amhara were forced out. The federation was imposed by force and those who voiced opposition were frequently facing intimidations, arrest, killing, detention, and even disappearance.

### ***Power Monopolization through the Creation of Incompetent Parties***

When the TPLF recognised that it would win the war, it understood that it would be difficult to assume political supremacy in the country as it represents only a small part of the country's population (Aalen 2002). As a result, the TPLF planned two techniques to ensure its political domination. The first was to establish a nationwide political party, which would be under its own control (Asnake 2009). However, the effort of building a nationwide Marxist-Leninist party ended in 1990 because of the collapse of socialism in the world at large (Asnake 2009).

The second was to establish a front by creating member political organisations that "represent" the different ethnic groups (Asnake 2009). In lieu of this strategy, the TPLF created a broader movement, i.e., the EPRDF with a membership of the EPDM (Aalen 2002). Then, other member parties

were created. OPDO (the current ODP) was created in 1990 to represent the Oromo people, after the OLF had been found to be not submissive and obedient enough (Gudina 2007). As stated earlier, the EPDM was changed into the ANDM (the current ADP) in 1994 in order to represent the Amhara people when the AAPO attempted to mobilise this people through its ethnic identity. The Southern Ethiopia People Democratic Front (SEPDF) was created in 1994 to “represent” the Southern Peoples after the Southern Ethiopia People Democratic Coalition (SEPDC) had criticised the authoritarian character of the TGE (Aalen 2002). These parties, having been created by the TPLF, were obedient to their creator rather than defend the interests of the people they claimed to represent (interviewee from EFDUF, 24 January 2019, Addis Ababa). This idea is even shared by officials from the ADP as an interviewee from this party explained: “although we were a member of the governing coalition, the TPLF was the dominant political power and many of the decisions were based on its interests” (4 January 2019, *Bahirdar*). Hence, “though EPRDF embraces various organizations, TPLF dominates EPRDF to such an extent that EPRDF has been considered as a deceptive euphemism for TPLF” (Alemante 1992: 212). This demonstrates how the federal formation process was dominated by the TPLF.

### ***Electoral Frauds and Power Consolidation***

As part of the transitional process, elections were held in 1992 (for local and district level councils) and 1994 (for the Constitutional Assembly). Conditions leading to and during the election, however, were not conducive to opposition political parties. TPLF/EPRDF leaders were claiming that they were the only legitimate rulers since they had overthrown *Dergue*. “We [the EPRDF] fought for 20 years, and it is not fair that any party born yesterday should compete with us. We will fight to keep the power” (cited in Aalen 2002: 9). Such attitudes forced EPRDF leaders to be intolerant towards competitive political forces. The TPLF/EPRDF, which dominated the armed forces by providing two thirds of the soldiers (Alemante 1992), undertook intimidation and harassment against the leaders and members of legally registered political parties (Kidane 2007). It employed violent and undemocratic tactics for upsetting election proceedings in order to maintain power (interviewee from EFDUF, 24 January 2019, Addis Ababa).

Leaders and members of the OLF, EPRP, AAPO, Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM) and Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) were facing various intimidations (Amnesty International 1994). The torture methods included tying the victims' arms tightly behind their backs with plastic strips, depriving them of food, death threats and mock executions (Amnesty International 1994), all of which were admitted by the new administration, which forced the prime minister to apology in front of the parliament (interviewee from ODP, 16 January 2019, Addis Ababa).

These behaviours of the incumbent forced many of the strong political parties to boycott the elections (Lyons 1996). Although the AAPO and OLF were the major competing organisations at the time (Aalen 2002), they were forced to boycott both the 1992 and 1994 elections, which left the EPRDF without meaningful opposition (Lyons 1996). Hence, TPLF/EPRDF controlled the political space and won the elections with the help of multiple electoral frauds (Lyons 1996). In this way, members of the Constitutional Assembly were elected.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the TPLF/EPRDF controlled the Constitutional Commission (a body organised by the Transitional Government to prepare the draft constitution) and the Constitutional Assembly through which it manipulated the drafting and ratification processes of the constitution (Gudina 2007).

It is apparent that the process behind the new constitution was even less inclusive and participatory than the process behind the transitional charter. In the constitutional process, the EPRDF totally dominated the scene. It is therefore impossible to conclude that the final confirmation of the federal solution through the constitution was based on a pact or covenant between contending political forces.... The new constitution, the main document for legalizing and formalizing the federal system, was ratified by a Constitutional Assembly controlled by the ruling party (Aalen 2002: 42).

Consensus is crucial to come up with a legitimate federal pact. However, the FDRE constitution lacks this legitimacy, particularly for the Amharas, as the ratification and drafting processes were not democratic (interviewee from NaMA, 04 January 2019, *Bahirdar*). The elections for the Constitutional Assembly were undertaken in such a manner that competent parties were

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6 The Constitutional Assembly was directly elected by the "Nations, Nationalities and Peoples" to adopt the draft constitution while the Constitutional Commission was organised by the TGE to prepare a draft constitution.



forced to boycott the elections due to the measures. The Commission was also criticised for being dominated by individuals who were affiliated to the TPLF (interviewee from ADP, 15 January 2019, *Bahirdar*). Hence, the partiality in the selection of the members for the constitutional commission and fraud during the election process (both the 1992 and 1994) are the other justifications for the putting-together nature of Ethiopia's federation. Generally, this article argues that Ethiopia's federation came into effect without a meaningful democratic bargaining. The peace conference, the institutionalisation of the TGE, the 1992 local and district level election, the 1994 election for a Constitutional Assembly were all dominated by the TPLF/EPRDF. Political organisations with alternative programs were forced to withdraw from these processes through coercive measures. Thus, these data all support the thesis that Ethiopia's federation is a putting-together federation.

### **The Amharas' Recurrent Quest in the Light of the Putting-Together Federation**

In political meetings, demonstrations, televised debates and the like, Amharas request the restoration of boundary and identity as well as the recognition of equal citizenship. This section examines these issues in relation to the flaws of the federal formation processes.

### ***The Politics of Recognition and the Hierarchy of Ethnicities at the Sub-State Levels***

Ethnic federalism and a multicultural perspective of citizenship were sought to ensure the inclusion and protection of nations, nationalities and people of Ethiopia (Birhanie 2017). However, the *de jure* and *de facto* experiences of different regions are characterised by a hierarchy of ethnicities (Abbink 2011; Van der Beken 2007). For instance, Abbink (2009: 22) notes that “linguistic-cultural backgrounds were recognized politically and made the basis of regional and local administrations, to be filled by local people, *often to the exclusion of so-called non-natives despite their job qualifications* (emphasis added).” Van der Beken (2007), who studied the constitutional protection of “minorities” in selected regions, also found that the regional constitutions, except for the Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) constitution, have

not constitutionally guaranteed mechanisms for the protection of ethnic minorities. Thus, “minority” ethnicities, who live outside their own territorial units are excluded and relegated to a *secondary* status – although the main motive for the institutionalisation of ethnic federalism and multicultural citizenship was to avoid such exclusions and hierarchies. The following cases illustrate the situation of Amharas in three selected regions.

Oromia is one of the regions in which diverse ethnic groups are found. However, the regional constitution nowhere mentions ethnic groups other than the Oromo. For instance, Amharas make up 10% of the total population in this region (CSA 1994). Nevertheless, an ethnic group with such a size is not given recognition and protection by the regional constitution. The regional constitution gave its highest political power only to the Oromo (making up 85% of the region’s population) as it proclaims that “the Oromo people are the highest political power holder of the region” (the Revised Constitution of Oromia 2002: art. 8; see also Van der Beken 2007). The preamble of the constitution denies ethnic diversity as it refers to the *Oromo people* instead of *the people of the region* like the ANRS constitution does (Van der Beken 2007). Particularly, the exclusion of the Amhara, who make up a large part of the population in the region, is a clear indication of the absence of constitutional protection and recognition of non-titular ethnicities (see also Abbink 2006). However, an interviewee from ODP argued that “the highest power is given to the Oromo since the Oromos have the ultimate right to administer themselves and the resources in their land.”

A counter-argument could be that the problem of ethnic minorities in regions other than their “own” emanates from the institutionalisation of ethno-linguistic federalism. However, this is not convincing as there are differences across different regions. For example, the ANRS constitution proclaims that “the people of the region are the highest political power holders” (ANRS Revised Constitution 2002: art. 8), rather than giving it to the Amhara ethnic group which covers 92% of the region’s population (CSA 2007). Moreover, the Oromos that cover only 2.2% of the total population in ANRS (CSA 1994) are recognised and given a self-governing status while the Amharas of Oromia region (with that much size) are deprived of such a status. Based on a comparison between the Oromia and ANRS constitutions in relation to the protection of minorities, Van der Beken (2007:119) concludes as:

At this point we can already see differences between the Amhara and the Oromia constitution in the way they handle ethnic diversity. The first significant provisions are in the preamble. The preamble of the Amhara constitution refers to the peoples of the region, whereas the Oromia constitution refers to the Oromo people. This illustrates different constitutional attitudes towards diversity: a positive attitude in Amhara, and a negative one in Oromia. The constitutional provisions on sovereignty reinforce this attitude. In the Amhara constitution, sovereign power in the region is exercised by the different peoples, in Oromia by the Oromo people.

Hence, the ethno-national arrangement of the federation is not the sole problem. Instead, the lack of political willingness on the side of the officials of the respective regions on the one hand, and the absence of representatives who would articulate and defend Amhara's interests during the restructuring process on the other are also claimed to have significant influences (interviewee from ADP, 4 January 2019, *Bahirdar*).

The same holds true for the state of Harar. While the Harari, which make up 7% of the region's total population (CSA 1994), are designated as the owners of the Harar State (the Harar Revised constitution 2002: art. 8), the Amhara with 33% of the region's population (CSA 1994) are left without recognition. The regional government recognises Harari and Oromifa as the working languages (the Harari Revised constitution 2002: art. 6) and the region is administered jointly by the Harar National League and the OPD (Asnake 2009). Despite the fact that the size of the ethnic groups was the main criterion for choosing the working language of a given region, to distribute power among the different ethnic groups and to consider someone as a constituent member of that region according to article 46(2) of the federal constitution, the Amharas are deprived of these prerogatives in contrast to their population size (see table 1).

**Table 1. Ethnic Makeup of Harar People’s Regional State**

Ethnic Group	Proportion of population in the region’s total population
Amhara	33.1%
Harari	7.3%
Oromo	52.3%
Somali	1.6%
Tigre	1.6%
Others	4.1%
Total	100%

Source: Author’s computation based on the 1994 Ethiopian Population and Housing Census Report

The regional constitution under paragraph five of its preamble also implicitly excludes Amhara while it mentions the Harari and Oromo nationalities as stakeholders who undertook the revision of the constitution. Moreover, article five that discusses the working language of the region, the articles eight and 59 that gave sovereign political power to the Harari nationality through the Harar Nationality Council, and article 39 that gave the right to self-determination and self-governance exclusively to the Harari nationality (Harari Revised Constitution 2002) are exclusionary legal frameworks. Hence, the Amharas and other ethnic minorities in the region, although some prerogatives are presented for the Oromos, are considered secondary inhabitants.

The same experience prevails in the Benshangul-Gumuz Regional State (BGRS). The BGRS constitution explicitly identifies two types of inhabitants as owners and non-owners (the Revised Constitution of BGRS 2002: art. 2; see also Van der Beken 2007:125). Despite the fact that Amhara is the second largest ethnic group in the region (see table 2), it is not among the “owner” nationalities of the region. The “owner” nationalities of the region are Bertha, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao and Komo (Revised Constitution of BGRS 2002: art. 2).

**Table 2. Ethnic Makeup of the BGRS**

Titular Ethnic Groups	
Ethnic group	Proportion of population in the region's total population
Bertha	25.4%
Gumuz	20.6%
Komo	0.99%
Mao	1.8%
Shinasha	7.7%
Total	≈57%
Non-Titular Ethnic Groups	
Agaw-Awi	4.2%
Amhara	21.7%
Oromo	13.4%
Others	2.8%
Tigre	0.7%
Total	≈43%

Source: Author's computation based on the 2007 Ethiopian Population and Housing Census Report

As table 2 shows, except for the Bertha, all other owner nationalities have a small population size compared to the “non-owner,” Amhara. If one refers to the criteria listed under article 46(2) of the FDRE constitution, the exclusion of ethnic groups with large numerical size (while those with a small population size are given ownership status) is controversial. The regional constitution does not clearly state the criteria used for distinguishing some as owners and others as non-owners. However, the regional officials associate it with *temporal chronologies* in controlling the area. Here is a statement from an official of the region:

Although Amhara and Oromo have large population sizes, they are not among the owner nationalities as they came to this area (today's Benshangul-Gumuz area) after it was inhabited by the indigenous nationalities. Hence, the five nationalities are the owners whereas the Amhara and Oromo are migrants who came in search of a better life. (Interviewee from the office of the BGRS council, 13 February 2019, Assosa)

Nevertheless, it is controversial to mention historical occupation as a legitimate ground for making a distinction between owner and non-owner nationalities. The usual reference in this regard, article 46(2) of the FDRE constitution, nowhere mentions history as a criterion to delimit boundaries and to establish ownership entitlements.

Whatever it be, these cases demonstrate how the EPRDF has failed to come up with an inclusive political structure. Instead, the politics of recognition practiced in different regions is found to be exclusionary to such an extent that it does not give protection to other nationalities, except the owners. Moreover, the issue of establishing ownership is paradoxical in that it contradicts the federal constitution in several instances. Additionally, representation rights (Asnake 2009), equal membership rights (Van der Beken 2007; see also the respective constitution), and self-governing rights of the Amhara and other non-titular nationalities are disregarded in such regions. In line with this, Abbink (2006: 394) wrote that “the risk of discrimination of ethno-linguistic minorities by the dominant majority in a Regional State is real, and might lead to a new ethnic ranking system.” Such exclusions are even contradictory to the very principle of multicultural citizenship. They also contradict article 46(2) of the federal constitution. These contradictions all happened because the federation was institutionalised without meaningful deliberations.

### ***The Dilemma over Administrative Boundary Demarcations***

Soon after the 1991 Peace Conference, Ethiopia went through new administrative divisions with the creation of 14 regional administrations, which latter were reduced to nine regions (Asnake 2009). This restructuring process was enabled by the deal between the TPLF and the OLF and approved by the Council of Representatives dominated by the TPLF/EPRDF (Alemante 1992). Following the withdrawal from the TGE by the OLF in 1992 and the SEPDC in 1993, the TPLF controlled this restructuring process (Kidane 2007). According to article 46(2) of the FDRE constitution, the criteria used to delimit internal border demarcation are ethnic identity, willingness of the people, language, and settlement pattern. However, language and ethnicity were the main bases to “define regional and district borders” (Abbink 2009: 4). This boundary demarcation, however, led to recurrent boundary conflicts. “The majority of conflicts now dubbed ‘ethnic’ in Ethiopia are about boundaries between territorialised ethnic groups” (Abbink 2006: 397). Like

other ethnic groups in the country, Amhara has recurrent claims for the restoration of boundaries and for people who are supposed to be “annexed” by adjacent regions. Some of these claims are being justified in relation to historical occupation and others are justified based on the criteria of the federal constitution (interviewee from NaMA, 14 January 2019, Bahirdar). According to informants from both the ADP (particularly after its 12th conference) and the NaMA, the territorial demarcation made during the Transitional period rendered the Amharas into losers in different directions and, accordingly, they argue for it to be reconsidered. Similarly, Alemante (1992: 1) states that “the new boundaries were supposed to correspond with ethnicity, but in fact reflected political power. Under these arrangements ... the Amharas were the clear losers in the redistricting process.”

To support this argument, the case of Pawe will now be briefly examined, even if the Amhara’s border issue is raised in all directions. Pawe district is one of seven districts in the Metekel administrative zone of the BGRS. Although the whole of Metekel is claimed to be part of Amhara (based on historical attachments to the area), the incorporation of the Paweto BGRS is evaluated as illegal by some, as it is based on criteria stated under article 46(2) of the federal constitution.

**Table 3. Ethnic Makeup of Pawe District**

Ethnic group	Population size in number	Percentage
Amhara	36,309	79.72%
Kambata	2,111	4.63%
Haddiya	2,050	4.51%
Oromo	1,009	2.21%
Somali	875	1.92%
Tigre	374	0.82%
Titular nationalities	198	0.43%
others	2,626	5.76%
Total	45,552	100%

Source: Author’s computation based on the 2007 Ethiopian Population and Housing Census Report

As this table demonstrates, the largest group of inhabitants of the Pawe district are Amharas (CSA 2007). Yet, the owner nationalities together account for only 0.43% of the population size in this district. While the nationality with

the largest population size (Amhara) is neither allowed to have ownership status nor to enjoy self-governing rights, nationalities that cover less than *one percent* of the population are designated “owners.” In terms of settlement pattern, Pawe is one of the areas through which the ANRS is bordered by the BGRS. Thus, the criterion of settlement pattern is also fulfilled. Moreover, the Amhara of this district are repeatedly requesting to have a special *woreda* status<sup>7</sup> or to be part of the ANRS (interviewee from ADP office, 10 January 2019, Almu). On the other hand, interviewees from the titular ethnic group justify the incorporation in relation to historical possession. “In spite of the fact that *Pawe* is now inhabited by settlers, the land was occupied by the indigenous people before the arrival of settlers in the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, Pawe district is incorporated into the BGRS from this perspective” (interviewee from BGRS, 19 January 2019, Assosa). However, this does not look sound as the federal constitution does NOT have an implication to the consideration of historical occupation as a criterion to delimit boundary among regions. Thus, there is no constitutional ground for Pawe to be part of the BGRS and this would not have happened if the federation had come into effect through democratic dialogues.

## Conclusion

This article examined the formation of Ethiopia’s federation and its implications for the Amharas’ quest for the inclusive politics of recognition at the regional levels and the restoration of boundaries. I argue that the recurrent controversies in the politics of recognition and internal boundary demarcations are found to result from the formation of the federation, which was undertaken through undemocratic processes. The transitional period was characterised by a single party supremacy, that of the TPLF/EPRDF. Hence, Ethiopia is a putting-together federation in which the federal arrangement was imposed by this dominant power rather than resulting from a democratic, inclusive, and impartial federal bargaining. Particularly, the absence of an ethnic-based organisation that could represent Amhara during the Peace Conference, the exclusion of the major political organisations from the conference and the aftermath processes as well as the inhuman and extrajudicial treatments of those who were expressing their discontent in the restructuring processes are some of the justifications for characterising

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7 An arrangement to enjoy a self-governing power at the level of a district.



Ethiopia's federation as a putting-together federation. Moreover, the electoral frauds that forced the major political parties to boycott the 1992 and 1994 elections and the manipulation of the drafting and ratification processes of the constitution by the TPLF/EPRDF justify this position.

This putting-together federation culminated, among others, by depriving recognition from considerably sized minorities such as the Amharas at the sub-state levels. The *politics of recognition* issued by the constitution of different regions such as BGRS, Oromia, and Harari is found to be exclusionary against the considerable size of minorities such as the Amhara. Despite the fact that Amharas (and other minorities) are citizens of Ethiopia, they have secondary statuses and are left without protection. Moreover, the restructuring process, which was undertaken undemocratically and coercively, was characterised by controversies, as some of the demarcations are found to be contradictory to the federal constitution. As a result, the Amharas' recurrent requests for equal recognition and for the restoration of people and land that are supposed to be included in adjacent regions have foundations in such undemocratic and exclusive processes. Hence, it is recommended that the government of Ethiopia reconsider Ethiopia's federation through democratic, genuine, peaceful, consented, and inclusive federal bargaining.

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