

**THE QUEST FOR REGIONAL STATEHOOD AND ITS PRACTICABILITY UNDER THE POST-1991 ETHIOPIAN FEDERATION: THE DISCONTENTS AND EXPERIENCE OF SIDAMA NATION**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper examines the constitutional and alongside political dynamics associated with the Sidama nation's official and sustained demand to exercise the right to establish their own regional state and the repressive response of the ruling regime in post-1991 Ethiopia's federal system. The 1995 Ethiopian constitution defines Ethiopia as a federal polity and provides for the unconditional right to self-determination including secession for the various ethnonational groups as an organizing principle. The most important component of this right is the right to self-administration, and the central precept of this right is exercised through the establishment of one's regional state. After promising this right to every ethnonational groups, the constitution, however, established only nine ethno-linguistically demarcated regions most of which are delineated based on predominant ethnic identity. The constitution also allowed for other groups who do not have their region to establish their own regional state at "any time". The most explicit exception to regional arrangement based on ethno-linguistic identity has been the case of Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS) which is comprised of over 56 extremely different ethnic groups and formed by a forced merger of five previously autonomous regions. As a result, there are some inherent paradoxes in the federal setup where some groups with small population and territory were allowed their own regional state. Whereas on the other extreme, the Sidama, the fifth most populous nation, whose population goes well over 5 million, and with also long history of struggle against oppression, with viable economic capacity, and with the experience of autonomous provincial existence and administrative bureaucracy under previous regimes is denied separate statehood thereby relegated to zonal status. The forced dismantling of its autonomous regional state which existed for brief period until 1994 and subsequent suppression and rejection of their official demand led them to live in a continued political discontent. This paper finds out that despite a persistent quest for regional statehood through constitutionally sanctioned procedures, their quest is not properly addressed, and instead, the way in which it is handled led to repressive state response and serious human rights violations. Drawing on the experience of Sidama people, it argues that the arbitrary suppression of genuine demands for the exercise of collective right contradicts the raison d'être of federalism and its principles, defeats the supremacy clause of the constitution, and makes the said right dysfunctional. Therefore, the paper suggests that the genuine demand of the people should be addressed based on the constitutional principles which in turn helps make the federal system responsive; and it also calls for determined and vigilant effort on the part of the concerned people in the exercise of their rights in way that it makes the right effective.*

**KEYWORDS:** Ethiopia, regional-statehood, federation, sidama, discontents, self-determination

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper briefly attempts to examine the Ethiopian constitutional system which established ethnically demarcated regions after its advent into the experiment of ethno-linguistic federalism.<sup>1</sup> It considers the constitutional and tangentially political controversies associated with the call to exercise the right to establish one's own regional state and unconstitutional and violent state response in post-1991 period. It does so by looking at subsequent developments related with the persistent attempt by the Sidama nation to form its own new regional state away from the Southern Regional State which is formed by a forced merger of more than 56 different ethnic groups. The paper does not chiefly deal with the debate about whether constitutional and federal system in place is sound and appropriate. While the paper considers the initial problem in its formative years, however, it takes the system and its justifications as a standard, and only attempts to diagnose how those principles fared with respect to legitimate demands of the ethno-national groups to exercise their constitutional right to establish own region by focusing on the experience of Sidama people. The experience of Sidama people takes the form of protest in response to forced dismantling of its autonomous region in the federation's formative years; organized official demand for statehood in late July 2005; and arbitrary, violent state response and extra-constitutional manipulations which continued to date. This trend continued intact even after the weakening of the centralized ruling party following the violent popular protest since 2015, and the emergence of new leadership from within who ensured the survival of the party but in a notably new 'reform' direction.

Due to the joint military assault of the ethnonational armed forces, the Marxist military junta called Derg who ruled the country from 1974-1991 collapsed in the face of the crumbling socialist world. By using the coalition of these groups, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (hereafter EPRDF), a coalition of ethnic-based organizations, controlled political power in 1991. It spear-headed a multi-ethnic coalition rallied for self-determination for oppressed nationalities, convened a national peace conference of July 1991, and quickly established the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE).<sup>2</sup> The conference produced a transitional charter as an interim constitution that laid the groundwork for the structure of the would be federation, in tune with the visions of the victorious Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (hereafter TPLF) who emerged as the coalition's military and political leader.<sup>3</sup> According to the preamble of the Transitional Charter, "self-determination of the people shall be [one of the] governing principles of political, economic and political life" henceforth. The Charter affirmed the rights of the ethnic groups to 'self-determination up to and including secession' and provided for the establishment of local and regional governments based on 'nationality'.<sup>4</sup> Before the constitution came in to being, the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper takes a conceptualization of ethnic-based federalism as the system mainly "comprised of ethnically defined national citizenship, self-determination on an ethno-linguistic basis as enshrined in the constitution, ethnically defined political representation and decision making at all levels and related policies". See International Crisis Group, (2009), *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, Africa Report No 153, Nairobi/Brussels, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Alem Habtu (2003). *Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia: Background, Present Conditions and Future Prospects*, A Paper Presented to the Second EAC International Symposium on Contemporary Development Issues in Ethiopia, p. 10; Vaughan, S, (1994), *The Addis Ababa Transitional Conference of July 1991: Its Origins, History and Significance*, Centre of African Studies, The University of Edinburgh.

<sup>3</sup> Merera Gudina (2003), *Competing Ethnic Nationalism and the Quest for Democracy 1960-2000*, Shaker Publishing.

<sup>4</sup> Art 13 of *Transitional Charter of Ethiopia* of 1991, *Negarit Gazetta No. 1*, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1991.

Proclamation No. 7/1992 also named as *National/Regional Self-Governments Establishment Proclamation* established both central and regional governments.<sup>5</sup> It laid the basis for an ethnically based decentralized state<sup>6</sup> which also marked the ‘reversal’ of the centuries-old centralist state-building project. The federal arrangement later sanctioned by the constitution was meant to effectively address the past injustice and solve the grievances of the various ethno-linguistic and religious groups,<sup>7</sup> ‘recognize and accommodate diversity’ and manage inter-ethnic conflicts.<sup>8</sup> The explicit inclusion of the right to self-determination including secession and what some call the ‘politicization of ethnicity’ is argued to be the Ethiopia’s ‘unique experiment’ while most of the post-colonial African states attempted to avoid such explicit recognition of ethnicity as a political force.<sup>9</sup> By considering how the Ethiopian empire state is formed after conquest and subsequent expansion, a notable political scientist, Crawford Young posits that the unique Ethiopian version of ethnic federalism, “is primarily a product of its unique historical itinerary...The 1995 constitution merely ratified this reality”.<sup>10</sup>

While the constitution promised the right to regional self-rule as a principal component of the right to self-determination for every ethno-national groups, it however only established nine regional states as founding members of the federation. The regional restructuring has been severely criticized for being imposed in a top-down approach, and some of these regional states were established in an arbitrary manner without genuine political negotiation, without ensuring the consent of the peoples concerned and in the absence of credible consensus. As such, it emerged nearly contrary to the legitimate expectations of some of the politically viable ethnic constituencies and it also remained unresponsive to a changed demands and time. The drafters of the constitution sought to address this deliberately maintained loophole and frail regional demarcation by providing a procedure in the Art 47 (2) of the constitution which authorizes those groups who have no regional status could establish their own one at any time. However, the attempt by some ethnic groups to exercise the implementation of the constitutional rights to self-determination has been perplexing and exhibits serious contradictions owing to different reasons.

### ***Why the Case of Sidama Nation?***

Persistent claims by Sidama national group, who were merged within the southern region without their consent, to establish their own regional state based on the constitutional guarantees have encountered a rolling challenges and arbitrary opposition from the regime and other contending actors. As can be seen, the Sidama case is perhaps the first of its kind surfaced to claim autonomous

<sup>5</sup> Aaron Tesfaye (2002), *Political Power and Ethnic Federalism: The Struggle for Democracy in Ethiopia*, Lanham: The University Press of America, p. xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Christophe Van der Beken (2007), ‘Ethiopia: From a Centralized Monarchy to a Federal Republic’, *Africa Focus Vol. 20*, No 1 & 2, (pp. 13-48).

<sup>7</sup> Abdi Ismael Samatar (2008), Ethiopian Ethnic Federalism and Regional Autonomy: The Somali Test, *Bildhaan: International Journal of Somali Studies*, Vol. 5 Issue 1, (44-76), p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> See Assefa Fisseha (2007), *Federalisms and the Accommodation of Diversity in Ethiopia: A Comparative Study*, Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers; Yonatan Tesfaye (2010), *Ethnic Diversity and Federalism: Constitution-Making in South Africa and Ethiopia*, Ashgate Publishing.

<sup>9</sup> Turton, D. (ed). (2006). *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in a Comparative Perspective*, London: James Currey.

<sup>10</sup> Crawford Young (2007), A Review of [ Turton, D. (ed). (2006). *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in a Comparative Perspective*], *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 77, No. 2, (pp. 305-306.), p. 305.

regional statehood under the new epoch of the federal political experimentation and under the new constitutional order in the post-1991 Ethiopia. The Sidama people constitute over 5 million with conservative figure and are the fifth most populous nation in the country. Their quest for autonomy, equality and self-rule can be traced back to early years of a movement of struggle against national oppression during imperial (up to 1974) and Derg rules (1974-1991). Given the fact that the new ruling elites in post-1991 period betrayed their cause of earlier struggle, their struggle also remained vigorous during the incumbent EPRDF rule and often met series of violent responses and drastically punitive measures from the ruling regime over the years. In this regard, the observation of the operational reality in the Sidama case unequivocally reveals that the demand to exercise those provisions in the country's wider political context is more controversial in practice than as promised in the constitution.

Nevertheless, despite their consistent demand, the deliberately maintained lack of political will to dispense acceptable solutions as prescribed by the constitution is not without perverse consequences. Due to the absence of political commitment to accord the constitutionally sanctioned solution, absence of the peaceful negotiations and suppression of outlets to express political grievances, the relationship between the ruling regime and Sidama people remained extremely polarized and unpeaceful<sup>11</sup> now for nearly three decades. The polarization is discernible where the regime is not willing to welcome, recognize and address their quest in a constitutionally recognized manner. The regime also tries to approach Sidama's call for self-administration as mere administrative quest, which is to be solved by simple administrative procedures, the approach of which is deficient and conflict-producing. At other time, the regime attempts to label the quest as the one motivated by 'self-interested political elites', generated by 'narrow nationalism', or 'works of anti-peace elements' or tries to deal with mediocrity and engage its political and party apparatus in crude manipulations to thwart the legitimate popular question. As the research for this study reveals, the Sidamas has been making a dedicated peaceful struggle to realize their regional statehood which they claim is illegitimately dismantled during restructuring of the state. In this political climate, after more than two decades with their quest, the constitutional provisions referring to the collective right to regional self-determination has not been a real experience for them. On the other hand, as informants to this study indicated, the government's defined priority in Sidama and indeed in other ethnic constituencies has been a focus to broaden and maintain political support base and strength its hegemonic rule. The party state is run by the ideology of revolutionary democracy which Nicholas Batch says is 'neither revolutionary nor democratic',<sup>12</sup> run often from above by suppressing voices of call for self-rule.<sup>13</sup>

The experience of Sidama nation provides a strong evidence to corroborate the argument that the cardinal *raison d'être* of the federal option, such as addressing nation/nationalities question through self-rule and mending or reducing 'ethnic conflicts'<sup>14</sup> has not been effectively achieved.

<sup>11</sup> Kifle Wansamo, (2009), *Towards Building Stability in Multi-Ethnic/National Society: Conflict in Sidaamaland*, VDM Publishers.

<sup>12</sup> Batch, J N. (2011), Abiyotawi democracy: neither revolutionary, nor democratic, a critical review of EPRDF's conception of revolutionary democracy in post-1991 Ethiopia, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Vol.5, Issue 4, pp. 641-663.

<sup>13</sup> Vaughan, S. (2011), Revolutionary Democratic State Building: Party, People and the State in the EPRDF's Ethiopia, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5 (4), 619-640.

<sup>14</sup> Asnake Kefale, (2009), *Federalism and Ethnic Conflicts in Ethiopia: A Case study of Benishangul-Gumuz and Somali Regional States* (PhD Dissertation, Leiden University, Amsterdam).

As such, the Sidama case has much useful experience to provide for openly interrogating the effective practicality of this right provided in the 1995 constitution of Ethiopia, and seriously examine the performance of the federal system. Moreover, the paper specifically argues that the way in which the Sidama case is approached defeats the very supremacy clause of the constitution and the fundamental ideal of the federal solution. As pointed out, in the context of the current ethno-linguistic federalism, inappropriate way of dealing with the quest for regional statehood has triggered violent response from the state security apparatuses. On several occasions, remarkably atrocious incidents have taken place between the Sidama civilians and state security forces where the state targets people to make defer their demands, command silence and ensure obedience to its hegemonic rule. The most notable tragic incident has been known as *Looqqe Massacre* of May 22, 2002 in which the state security forces massacred over 80 unarmed civilian demonstrators, and caused more injuries, massive imprisonment and targeting of innocent civilians and activists<sup>15</sup> among other things. Early observers warned that such problems of uncertainty and insecurity would go unabated and would continue to be the main challenge to genuine democratization efforts, building constitutionally limited state, and unduly hamper the performance of the federal political spectrum in the country. The status of the previous official quest by the Sidama zonal council brought in July 2005 remained uncertain after central executive blocked it. Very recently on 18 July 2018, the council convened and again unanimously endorsed their quest for statehood after the new prime minister came to power. Since then, there has been more organized rallies for referendum to be organized in one-year time, but the referendum did not materialize on the expected time. In late July 2019, the friction between Sidamas' continued push for referendum and government's effort to forcefully reverse it once again led to deadly violent clash between government security forces and Sidama civilians which resulted in loss of life and damage to property as we shall see further below.

At national level, the advent of federalism in Ethiopia has generated plenty of academic works which are written both by proponents and detractors which examine its nexus with constitutionalism, ethnicity and ethnic conflict, state building, fiscal aspects, electoral politics, minority rights, intergovernmental relations, etc. Except in some cases, however, most of the available works largely focus on national level or to a lesser degree inter-regional (macro-level) analysis, and important sub-regional cases go without serious treatment or dealt with only incidentally. Though the Sidama peoples' demand for establishing its regional statehood has been one of the most volatile political activities in post-1991 Ethiopia, it remained largely under-treated by academic research. On the other hand, there is a little interest on the part of the Ethiopian and Ethiopianist scholars on issues pertaining to the peripheral peoples like the Sidama though one can see some improvement in the trend recently. Moreover, as noted above, much is unfolding currently in Sidama which warrants analysis by the academics and political commentators.

This paper is conceived during the writer's undergraduate study in Hawassa University which inspired by the theory and practice of the Ethiopian federation, and some of its sections were produced as part of senior *LLB Thesis* in June 2013. The paper attempts to put the current dynamics of the quest of Sidama people for regional statehood in a historical frame of reference and tries to

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<sup>15</sup> Wollassa, 2002 *The Looqqe Massacre*; The Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) Report (2003); Muluneh Ayalew and Hailemeskel Beshewamyelch (2005 E.C), *Meles' Legacy* (book in Amharic).

shed some light on the current trajectories. Hence, it attempts to address the shortfalls of the state willingness in the enforcement of the right to regional self-determination, the deep-seated discontents and its dire consequences by critically looking at the experience of Sidama people. The data for this work comes from interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, causal interactions, critical review of available literature and examining the pertinent laws. Drawing on the suggestion by Lovise Aalen,<sup>16</sup> the paper takes a broader approach which goes beyond the conventional constitutional law analysis and tries to look at social and political conditions since relying purely on constitutional law analysis does not reveal the complete picture of the case. The paper also indirectly aims to bring together some of the existing works on the topic and analyse and put them in perspectives. By doing so, the paper contributes to our increased knowledge and understanding, from below, about the performance of the Ethiopia's federal system in respect of addressing the legitimate claims of ethnic/national groups. But the paper does not claim to be a comprehensive presentation of the complex constitutional-political dynamics, nor does it claim to provide a straightforward suggestion. It only aims to provide an insider's framework for understanding its unfolding and tries to bring the case to the attention of researchers. The paper has 8 sections. Following this introduction, section two provides a brief overview of the genesis of Sidama regional question and tries to put it in perspective. Section three takes up the restructuring of the post-1991 state along ethno-linguistic lines and 'original injustice' followed by the fourth section which discusses about the discontents of Sidama nation after this epoch and some of its manifestations. Section five presents the formal/official demand for Sidama regional statehood and subsequent developments. Section six provides a brief overview of opposition to Sidama demand. Section seven reflection from perspectives of constitution, and highlights on current situation, and the last sections concludes.

### **An Overview of the Genesis of Sidama Regional Question and Its Perspective**

Sidama nation one of the ancient human groups to live in their present area in the south-central part of present-day Ethiopia. They belong to East highland Cushitic language family and form a part of great Cushitic civilizations that produced significant achievements in the north-eastern part of Africa. They share a large measure of commonalities with their Cushitic neighbors including that of conquest and domination. Earlier ethnographic studies conducted among the Sidamas by some scholars have empirically demonstrated the egalitarian Sidama gerontocracy. The Sidamas existed as an independent nation-state in the horn of Africa for many centuries.<sup>17</sup> As Seyoum observes, the pre-conquest Sidama people developed a very complex and important set of cultural values, norms and principles with 'predictable enforcement' which have been handed down from generation to generation as embodied in the nation's rich oral history.<sup>18</sup> Such independent status and important social institutions were downgraded when the nation was conquered by the armed might-the imperial armies of king Menelik of Shewa in 1893.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Lovise Aalen (2011), *The Politics of Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Actors, Power and Mobilization Under Ethnic Federalism*, Leiden: Brill.

<sup>17</sup> Wolassa L. Kumo (2016), *The Sidama Nation: History, Culture and Political Economy* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing).

<sup>18</sup> Seyoum Hameso (2006), The Sidama Nation: An Introduction, In Seyoum Hameso and Mohamed Hassen, (eds.), *Arrested Development in Ethiopia: Essays on Underdevelopment, Democracy and Self-determination*, The Red Sea Press.

<sup>19</sup> Wolassa L. Kumo (2016), The Sidama Nation, *ibid.* Seyoum (1998; 2006), *ibid.*

However, a very little is known about Sidama people and its historiography<sup>20</sup>. Commenting about a general lack of literature about this people in 1987, William A. Shack describes Sidama as ‘an Ethiopian people little known in anthropological literature’,<sup>21</sup> which also continues to the present political experiences. This is not by accident but it owes to nature of the country’s greater history wherein the political, social and economic lives, struggles and achievements, ways of life and current dynamics of the marginalized and politically peripheral peoples remain undemapped and underrepresented.<sup>22</sup> The historiography on Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa had little or no room to accommodate the documentation and promotion of the subjugated and politically non-dominant peoples and their cultures.<sup>23</sup> As a result, historical documents particularly that interrogate and shed light on the origins of the subjugated nations such as Sidama in present day Ethiopia is so scarce. As Sidama academic Seyoum Hamesso argues, this neglect by academics about the histories, struggles and experiences of oppressed peoples severely circumvented knowledge creation and information dissemination which also ‘remained a bone of contention’ among the contemporary Sidama intellectuals.<sup>24</sup> The general lack of academic treatment has generally “resulted in confusion and ambiguity in identifying the people, the culture, the history and current developments underlying change and continuity in Sidama”<sup>25</sup> According to Seyoum,<sup>26</sup> the severe lack of lack of academic works even for mere academic purposes impacts knowledge creation and information dissemination. Since modern education is a recent phenomenon in the political history of a Sidama nation, critical scholarship on its way of life and its indigenous knowledge by either its scholars or foreign writers has been relatively absent, partly owing to the continued exploitative experience.

On the other hand, the mainstream Ethiopian historiography is established on the premise of ignoring the history, cultures and achievements of the oppressed and peripheral peoples such as the Sidamas or supersedes issues pertaining to them.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, most of the historical studies about the Ethiopian societies are informed by the tradition of “Greater Ethiopia”.<sup>28</sup> According to Aalen, this paradigm describes the events from the point of the view of the imperial ruling class dominated by northerners, and revolves around the centrality of Amhara.<sup>29</sup> The expansion of imperial Ethiopia to the newly conquered territories of the south, southeast and southwest is, thus, ‘portrayed as a process of incorporation and integration rather than one of occupation, subjugation and subsequent alienation’.<sup>30</sup> As noted, the orientation towards the center has led to a general lack of written history on southern Ethiopia including the Sidamas. The available foreign sources on Sidama nation are also ‘only scattered bits and pieces in Ethnographic and historical studies and religious studies’.<sup>31</sup> While the 20<sup>th</sup> century socio-economic life in Sidama is well treated by John

<sup>20</sup> Seyoum Hameso, (2004), The Sidama Nation and the Solidarity of the Colonized Nations in Ethiopia, In Asafa Jalata (eds). *State Crisis, Globalization and National Movements in North-east Africa*, New York: Routledge (pp. 165-181), p. 165.

<sup>21</sup> William A Shack (1987), [A Review for] Jan Brogger, *Belief and Experience among the Sidamo: Case Study Towards an Anthropology of Knowledge*, Oslo: Norwegian University Press (1986), *The American Anthropologist*, 1987, p. 158.

<sup>22</sup> Markakis, J (2011), *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, Suffolk and New York: James Currey.

<sup>23</sup> Mulugeta B. Daye (2013), Ancient Sidama from Kush 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC to 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. ([www.srdf.org](http://www.srdf.org)).

<sup>24</sup> See also Seyoum Hameso (2006), The Sidama Nation, *ibid*.

<sup>25</sup> Seyoum Hameso (2004), The Sidama Nation and the Solidarity of the Colonized Nations in Ethiopia, *ibid*, p. 165.

<sup>26</sup> Seyoum, *ibid*, (2006), p. 56-58

<sup>27</sup> Pausewang, (1997); John Markakis, (2011), *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, *ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> Levine, D, (1974), *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of Multiethnic Society*, The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>29</sup> Lovise Aalen (2011), *The Politics of Ethnicity in Ethiopia*, *ibid*.

<sup>30</sup> Aalen, (2011), *ibid*, p. 21

<sup>31</sup> Lovise Aalen, (2011), *ibid*, p. 21.

Hamer in 1987 in his classic book *The Humane Development: Participation and Change among the Sidama of Ethiopia*, the historical sources about Sidama during the Derg period is nearly absent. Even the first ever important edited volume to treat about the conquered peoples of the south and their perspectives by Donham Donald and James Wendy titled *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia* does not have coverage about the Sidama nation.<sup>32</sup> Hence, the contemporary Sidama scholars and others suggest for ‘the use of ethnological studies and the analysis of oral tradition, as reported by oral historians of the nations’ which may ‘help to substantiate or else challenge the available meager historical documentation and reconstruct the lost truth, liberating it from distortions’.<sup>33</sup> Generally, however, limited academic and non-academic works on Sidama exist.<sup>34</sup>

The genesis of the Sidama quest for self-determination relates to the the manner in which it was incorporated into the Ethiopian empire state, and subsequent rise of ‘nationalities question’ in Ethiopia. The historical root of ‘nations/nationalities question’ in Ethiopia goes far back to the way in which the Ethiopian empire state was formed.<sup>35</sup> History informs that peoples of various backgrounds, languages, identities and cultures were conquered and brought to live in the empire under what scholars called “unequal terms”. Historically, the Sidama conceive that their quest for regional self-determination goes far back to the early periods of organized and unorganized struggles against the alienation and exploitation under past successive Ethiopian regimes. The long known feudal oppression and subjugation imposed on the people by the imperial conquest brought about untold atrocities, alienated their land and resources, downgraded their dignity and turned them into ‘virtual slavery’ on their ancestral land. This was halted for a brief period during Italian occupation. The successive regimes in Ethiopian political life have implemented an alternating policy directions which remained largely inimical to the aspirations of the ‘peripheral peoples’ and their political and economic development.<sup>36</sup> History evidences that various oppressed peoples including Sidamas were forced to take up arms to resist the oppressive system and achieve their equality, dignity and freedom. Noting problematic historical epoch along with the wider trajectories from early days in Sidama history, a notable historian concludes that “History was not kind to the Sidama”.<sup>37</sup> Against this historical injustice, they began to conduct some degree of organized movement following the Italian occupation and in the pre-1974 revolution period.

Sidama resistance against brutal rule reached its higher level during the Derg regime. Sidamas, along with Oromos, Tigrayans, Somalis and others, were one of the notable national groups from

<sup>32</sup> Donham, D and Wendy, J, (1986), *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>33</sup> Mulugeta B. Daye, (2013).

<sup>34</sup> John Hamer, 1966, 1972, 1994, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2007, 2009. John H. Hamer (1987); Jan Brogger (1986); Arne Tollo (1998); Wolassa L. Kumo (2007; 2013; 2016); Seyoum Hameso (1997; 1998, 2004, 2006, 2014, 2015); Kifle Wansamo, S.J (2003; 2007; 2009); Lovise Aalen (2007; 2011); Vecchiato Norberto L (1985); Other scholars such as Ernesto Cerulli, Macchiani, Ulrich Braukamper, Stanley(1966); N. Vecchiato, Oyvind Aadlan (2002); Betana Hotesso (1991; 2012), Mulugeta B. Daye (2003; 2006;2015), Markos Tekle Rike (2011; 2014); Ambessa Tafarra (2000); Ambaye Ogato (2008; 2012; 2015); Samuel Djilo (2014, 2015) and Harka Haroye (2005), among others. I have dealt with these literatures in other works (forthcoming).

<sup>35</sup> Leenco Lata (2004), What Next in the Horn of Africa: Reconsidering the State and Self-determination, In Asafa Jalata (ed.), *State Crisis, Globalization and National Movement in Northeast Africa*, New York: Routledge; Merera Gudina (2003).

<sup>36</sup> See Asafa Jalata (2004) (eds), *State Crisis, Globalization*, ibid; Seyoum Hameso and Mohammed Hassen (2006) (eds), ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Markakis, (2011), p. 37.



political peiphery ‘who launched their own national liberation struggles’.<sup>38</sup> This was marked by the formation of the armed Sidama Liberation Movement (hereafter SLM) in 1976 whose declared goal was to wage armed struggle in the effort to collapse dictatorship and maintain autonomy and freedom of Sidama people.<sup>39</sup> As Shiferaw Muleta notes recently, “The armed struggle of the SLM for self-rule was one of the top five armed struggles launched ... against the Socialist-Dictatorship of the Derg regime. The SLM was active in its armed struggle for over a decade and the Sidamas sacrificed more than 10,000 men in different battle fields in Sidama region”.<sup>40</sup> During this time, Sidama liberation fighters were able to liberate 4 districts, namely Aroessa, Bansa, Harbagona and Hula from the Derg’s military rule and intensified their guerilla resistance until late 1980s.<sup>41</sup> The war against Derg in Sidama, which caused innumerable casualties,<sup>42</sup> remained largely untold in the history of resistance movement in the country. In the little available writings of the time, the Human Rights Watch in its 1991 volume *Evil Days* noted that “[T]he war in Sidama was one of the Derg’s best kept war secrets”.<sup>43</sup> They paid an immense sacrifice for the ‘gradual weakening’ and subsequent collapse of the Derg dictatorship but their story remains largely untold which informs imperatives for further research.<sup>44</sup> Specifically, their quest for self-determination took its current dimension after the inception of the new constitutional and administrative reform in the country in post-1991 period. As we shall see below, the post-1991 period is also heavily colored by the continuity from the country’s oppressive historical past, albeit in a changed state ideology. As notable Sidama academic summarizes, “The development of Sidama nationalism owes its origins in the conquest and the growing discontent and deep-seated malaise caused by the Ethiopian empire statehood”. In contemporary Ethiopia, Sidama falls under what professor Markakis terms ‘highland [political] periphery’.<sup>45</sup>

## **Restructuring of the Ethiopian State in Post-1991 Period and Formation of Regions**

### *Pre-Constitution Transitional Charter Period*

As Aregawi Berhe observes, the EPRDF became the most dominant force after the change of government in 1991, and it is responsible for state restructuring along ethnic federalism that grants nationalities with self-rule.<sup>46</sup> As a direct offspring of the Ethiopian Student Movement, the EPRDF saw ‘the Ethiopian project of ethnic federalism as one in series of Marxist-Leninist approaches to

<sup>38</sup> Markakis, (2011), p. 182.

<sup>39</sup> Vaughan, (2003); See also Woldemmanuel Dubale (1996), We have No [plan] of Separating Sidama from other Ethiopians, *Ethiopia Magazine*, (5),59. Lovise Aale, (2011).

<sup>40</sup> Shiferaw Muleta ( 29 May, 2019), *A Brief Political History of Sidama Nation Struggle for Self-rule*, Addis Standard (available: <http://addisstandard.com/special-edition-chronicles-of-sidama-peoples-struggle-for-self-rule/>)

<sup>41</sup> For more on this, See Wolassa L. Kumo (2016), pp. 129-132; See also Betana Hotesso (2012); Kifle Wansamo (2009).

<sup>42</sup> Markakis, (2011), p. 200; Markos Tekle et al (2011).

<sup>43</sup> Africa Watch (1991): *Evil Days: Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia*, p. 86. See Markos Tekle et al (2011), *ibid*.

<sup>44</sup> Recently, a book in Amharic was published on this topic. See Abebe Marimo (2019), *The History of the Armed Struggle of Sidama Liberation Movement*. (Amharic), Hawassa. Betana Hotesso, (2012), *Sidama: The People and Culture* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) provides a compelling history during Derg under last chapter).

<sup>45</sup> Markakis, 2011.

<sup>46</sup> Aregawi Berhe (2008), *A Political History of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (1975-1991): Revolt, Ideology and Mobilization in Ethiopia* (PhD Diss, University of Amsterdam), p. 330.

the ‘nationality question’.<sup>47</sup> As such, the ideological antecedents of EPRDF’s ethnic federalism project can be traced back to Marxist-Leninist ideology and its conception of national question.<sup>48</sup> The project followed the examples of the former Soviet Russia and Yugoslavia. The Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) at home and abroad had introduced Marxism-Leninism to Ethiopia in the mid-1960s.<sup>49</sup> When the EPRDF assumed power in alliance with Oromo Liberation Front and other national liberation movements, this doctrine became the basis for constructing a new federal structure.

The demise of the Derg and its dictatorial leader Col. Mengistu by the joint military assault of the ethno-national forces left the centre fragile and the integrity of the country at the brink of disintegration. The ethno-regional forces, led by Tigrayan insurgency (TPLF) triumphed over the unitarist center, and alluded to the revolutionary democracy and advocated for self-determination for nationalities under the order of ethno-linguistic federalism. The ruling EPRDF spear-headed a multi-ethnic coalition, convened a national conference of July 1991, and quickly established the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE).<sup>50</sup> The conference produced a national charter that laid the groundwork for the structure of the would be federation, in tune with the ambitions of the victorious TPLF as its military and political leader.<sup>51</sup> According to the preamble of the Transitional Charter, “self-determination of the people shall be [one of the] governing principles of political, economic and political life” henceforth. Hence, this doctrine of collective right to self-determination along ethno-linguistic lines became a basis for constructing a state structure.<sup>52</sup> The Charter affirmed the rights of the ethnic groups to self-determination<sup>53</sup> up to and including secession and provided for the establishment of local and regional governments based on ‘nationality’.<sup>54</sup> Before the constitution came in to being, it was the Proclamation No. 7/1992 named as National/Regional Self-Governments Establishment Proclamation which laid the basis for an ethnically based decentralized state. This law provided the roadmap which, in the 1995 constitution, would lead to the development of an ethnically based federation.<sup>55</sup> The constitutional arrangement tries to address the concerns of the various ethno-linguistic and religious groups.

Proponents pointed out that the provision for self-determination in its full sense reflects an agreement that ‘they are entitled to some sort of self-expression’<sup>56</sup> against the past ethnic and cultural suppression and resentment. However, critics dispute the idea on the ground that the ethnic political negotiation and state restructuring took place in a repressive climate where neither the

<sup>47</sup> Sandra, Joireman Fullerton (1997), Opposition Politics and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: We Will go down Together, in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 35, p. 387.

<sup>48</sup> . Alem Habtu (2003). Ethnic Federalism, *ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>49</sup> Alem Habtu, (2003), *ibid*.

<sup>50</sup> Alem Habtu, (2003); Vaughan, (1994).

<sup>51</sup>. Abdi Ismael Samatar (2006), *Ethiopian Ethnic Federalism and Regional Autonomy: ibid*.

<sup>52</sup> Alem Hbatu, (2003), p. 14; Vaughan, 1994; Aaron Tesfaye (2002), *infra*.

<sup>53</sup> Art 2 of the Charter which is the very important provision, declared that “the right of the nations and nationalities to self-determination is affirmed; and to this end, each nations and nationalities is guaranteed the right to preserve its identity, promote its culture and use and develop its culture; administer its own affairs within its defined territory, exercise the right to self-determination of independence, when concerned nations/nationalities is convinced that the above rights are deemed abridged or abrogated”.

<sup>54</sup> Art 13 of Transitional Charter of Ethiopia of 1991, *Negarit Gazetta No. 1*, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1991.

<sup>55</sup> Christophe V. Beken (2007), Ethiopia: From a Centralized Monarchy to a Federal Republic, *ibid*, p 39

<sup>56</sup> Fasil Nahum (1994) cited in Berhanu Gutema (2007), *Restructuring State and Society: Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia* (PhD Dissertation, University of Denmark), p. 79.

Ethiopian public nor the genuine representatives of the ethnic groups have been provided an opportunity for genuine negotiation. As Berhanu contends, it was an imposed structure ‘engineered by the EPRDF and agreed by the ethnic elites’.<sup>57</sup> In this atmosphere, the initial support for EPRDF by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Ogaden national Liberation Front (ONLF) and the Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM) ‘quickly evaporated after they claimed that the TPLF-led EPRDF has no genuine policy towards their peoples’, rather it is an instrument to install the hegemony of the Tigrayan elites and their regional surrogates. The EPRDF accused them for disrupting the transition to democracy and peaceful order and determined to eliminate them.

### ***Redrawing the Administrative Map along Ethno-Linguistic Lines: Original Injustice***

The TPLF was the main architect of the new political dispensation and it dominated the process of political transition ever since the Transitional Period Conference of July 1991 and the decades following it. In what appeared to be a reversal of the historical centralisation process<sup>58</sup>, the new power-holders pursued to institutionalize a self-rule for various ethno-national groups in the country, and redraw the administrative map of along ethnic-linguistic lines. After the ground clearing work through Transitional Charter, the implementation of the provisions of the Charter to redraw the map of the country was effected by the adoption of Proclamation No. 7/92 of 14 January 1992.<sup>59</sup> This law identified 64 nations and nationalities and 14 regions were created. According to some observers, the determination of new regional boundaries was conceived to be guided by the concern to create many ethnically homogenous regions as possible.<sup>60</sup> To realize the right to self-determination of all ethnic groups, the proclamation stipulated that 47 out of 64 ethnic groups listed have the right to self-government at woreda (district) level or above.<sup>61</sup> The remaining groups were to be considered minority nationalities that should have appropriate representation at woreda council. The limited number of regions established during the transitional period on the one hand and the large number of ethnic groups officially identified on the other obviously implies that most ethnic groups did not have their own administration.

Regions from one to five were mainly designated for Tigrayans, Afars, Amharas, Oromos and Somalis, respectively while the rest of the regions are ‘cohabited by a number of ethnic groups of varying population and territorial sizes’. Twelve of these regions composed of several dozens of ‘nations, nationalities and peoples’ (as the law and later constitution calls them). Addis Ababa and Harari were given regional status and together, fourteen regions were established.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, proc No. 7/1992 ‘was a milestone in the development of the Ethiopian state structure that followed’.<sup>63</sup> This law laid the basis for the ethically based decentralized state and indicated the road which in the constitution of 1995 would lead to the development of ethnically based

<sup>57</sup> Berhanu Gutema, (2007), *ibid.* p. 79.

<sup>58</sup> Assefa Fisseha (2007), *Federalism and the Accommodation of Diversity in Ethiopia*, *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> TGE (2003), *National/Regional Self-governments Establishment Proclamation No 7 of 1992*, Addis Ababa.

<sup>60</sup> Christophe Van de Becken (2007), Ethiopia: From Centralized Monarchy to a Federal Republic, *ibid.*, p. 38; See Lyons, T (1996), Closing the Transitions: The May 1995 Ethiopian Election, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol 34, No. 1 (pp. 121-142).

<sup>61</sup> Christoph Van de Becken (2007), *ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>62</sup> Merera, (2003), *Ethiopia: Competing Ethnic Nationalism*, *ibid.*, p. 123

<sup>63</sup> Merera Gudina (2003), *ibid.*, p. 122.

federation. Merera contends that the reordering of Ethiopian state along ethnic or linguistic lines was motivated by several political considerations:

[...] first, the philosophy of the victorious Tigrayan elites has been ‘national struggle first’, and hence there is need to recreate Ethiopia according to that image. Secondly, it was aimed at the reversal of the historical process that led to the creation of modern empire state of Ethiopia around the centrality of Amhara elites. Thirdly, the linguistic/ethnic based regionalization policy also carries with itself the need, if not the obligation, of the political processes along ethnic lines and running for public office along the same lines.<sup>64</sup>

The phase of drafting the new constitution was started with the establishment of ‘Constitutional Drafting Commission’ by the council of representatives of TGE with the proc. No 24/1992. The draft was submitted to the Council in April 1994, and in May 1994 the council of representatives ‘unanimously adopted’ the draft constitution and presented it to public discussion.<sup>65</sup> Then the constituent Assembly ratified the federal constitution in December 1994 which came to force in August 1995.<sup>66</sup> Critics argue that the constitution was drafted, discussed and ratified in the unfair political climate, in the absence of substantive deliberations and participation of opposition.<sup>67</sup> As such, in the atmosphere of domination and absence of genuine deliberations, let alone all ethnic groups, even some of the most populous viable national groups were not able to get their own self-governing state.

Though the constitution promised, under Art 39, the right to self-determination for every ‘nation, nationality and people’,<sup>68</sup> it however, only established nine asymmetrical regional states. Art 47 of the constitution lists down the names of the nine member states of the Ethiopian federation. In the constitution, it is provided that regional states are demarcated based on consent, settlement patterns and identity. For those regions mentioned in the constitution, some have core nationalities in which the region is named after dominant ethnic groups: these included Tigray, Amhara, Oromo, Somali, and Afar, whereas in other cases more than two ethnic groups were ‘lumped together by the administrative fiat’.<sup>69</sup> As we shall see below, in a stark contrast to the officially prophesied principle, regions 7-11 were forcedly merged through a process of ‘political surgery’ to establish an extremely diverse Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Regional State (hereafter SNNPR).<sup>70</sup> The alleged reason was to ensure ‘administrative expediency’, but clearly led by pragmatic political considerations. Given this background, the arrangement of the constituent members displays enormous asymmetry. As John Ishiyama observed:

<sup>64</sup> Merera Gudian (2003), *ibid*, p. 123 ff.

<sup>65</sup> For details, see Tsegaye R Ararssa (2010), *The Making and Legitimacy of the Ethiopian Constitution; Towards Bridging the Gaps Between Constitutional Design and Constitutional Practice*, *Afrika Focus*, Vol. 23, No. 1. pp. 85-118.

<sup>66</sup> Alem Habtu, (2003), p. 14; Christoph Van de Becken, (2007), p. 40;

<sup>67</sup> Asnake Kefale (2009), *Federalism and Ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia*, *ibid*, p. 57.

<sup>68</sup> According to the Art 39 (5) of the FDRE Constitution, ‘nation, nationality or people’ is defined as “a group of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory”.

<sup>69</sup> Merera (2003), pp. 138-139.

<sup>70</sup> Lovise Aalen (2007), *Institutionalizing the Politics of Ethnicity: Actors, Power and Mobilization in Southern Ethiopia under Ethnic Federalism* (PhD Diss, University of Oslo), p. 243; International Crisis Group (2009), *Ethiopia*, *ibid*, p. 5, foot note no. 36.

[...] The traditional Ethiopian provinces were recombined into nine ethnic based regional states and two federally administered city states. ... The result has been the development of an asymmetric federation that combines populous regions like Oromia and Amhara in the central highlands with sparsely populated and underdeveloped ones like Gambella and Somali. Although the constitution vests all powers not attributed to the federal government to them, the regional states are in fact quite weak and subject to political manipulations by the central state.<sup>71</sup>

The reduced number of regions established amidst the presence of over 80 different ethnic groups who want to exercise some form of self-rule exhibits some contradictions. The proponents of current arrangement argue that although ethnolinguistic criterion is the basis of classification, 'it became difficult to grant every ethnic group its own self-governing state. Consequently, many ethnic groupings have joined with much larger ethnic groups to form a state'.<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, those who disagree with such proposition hold that the project of regional reconfiguration is arbitrarily designed by the ruling elites without considering the legitimate interests of those who are not given such status. For instance, Berhanu Gutema contends that 'no convincing explanation has been provided in granting a separate state status for some very small ethnic groups like Harari (with some 200,000 population...) whereas denying the same status to the larger ones such as Sidama and others who indeed have millions of population'.<sup>73</sup> He further argues that 'neither the population size, nor the ethnic identity was the systematic and operational criterion for establishing self-governing regional states'. According to Mesfin Woldemariam, 'had the population size, ethnicity and consent of the people been the criteria, there would be at least 40 to 50 regional states making the constituting parts of the federation'.<sup>74</sup> Among other things, the regional restructuring has been seriously criticized for its arbitrary implementation in a top-down approach nearly contrary to the legitimate expectations of some of the ethnic constituencies. This feebly and arbitrarily imposed regional restructuring displays a continuity from the legacy of the exploitative past which undermines the legitimate interests of hitherto marginalized peoples or to maintain their lower status reserving the higher stakes for only dominant groups.

The constitution, however, provided for some outlet procedures for nations, nationalities and peoples who do not have their own state to establish their own state. Under Art 47 (1-3) of the constitution, every national/ethnic groups who live in other regional states have the unlimited right to establish, at any time, their own states after fulfilling some procedural requirements.<sup>75</sup> However,

<sup>71</sup> Ishiyama, JT, (2012), *Comparative Politics: Principles of Democracy and Democratization*, West Sussex: Blackwell, p. 212.

<sup>72</sup> Fasil Nahum (1997), *The Constitution for Nation of Nations: The Ethiopian Prospect*, The Red Sea Press, p. 52.

<sup>73</sup> Berhanu Gutema (2007), *Restructuring State and Society*, ibid, p. 93.

<sup>74</sup> Mesfin Woldemariam (1999:162) as cited in Berhanu Gutema, (2007), p. 93.

<sup>75</sup> Art 47 is reproduced partly as: 47(2). "Nations, Nationalities and Peoples within the states enumerated in sub-article 1 of this article have the right to establish, at any time, their own states; (3). The right of any nation, nationality or people to form its own state is exercisable under the following procedures: a). When the demand for statehood has been approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of the council of nation, nationality or people concerned, the demand is presented in writing to the State Council; b). when the Council that received the demand has organized a referendum within one year to be held in the territory of nation, nationality or people that made the demand; c). When the demand for statehood is supported by a majority vote in the referendum; d). when the State Council will have transferred its powers to the nation, nationality or people that made the demand; and e). when the new state created by the referendum without any need for application, directly becomes a member of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia".

as present work demonstrates below, the constitutional mechanism which provides such rights remained largely rhetoric. As such, persistent claims by Sidama national groups to establish their own regional state has met serious challenges from chiefly the ruling regime and other contending forces.

On broader level, ever since its inclusion in the states governance system, the right to self-determination for nationalities<sup>76</sup> remained a oft-used state vocabulary, yet much ‘contested topic’ in the post-1991 Ethiopian political life.<sup>77</sup> It generated wide fissures of arguments and counter-arguments and contestations. As notable veteran Oromo politician and writer puts it, ‘The invocation of self-determination is made inescapable by the very process of conquest that brought in to existence the Horn’s most populous state, the Ethiopian empire’.<sup>78</sup> The ‘pan-Ethiopian’ elites who forward Menelik’s conquest and incorporation as a ‘nation-building’ process accuse the EPRDF’s project of building state based on self-determination as the Ethiopia’s relapse into disintegration and seek to reverse it to the old past. The scholars who have a closer touch with the politics of the country maintained to describe the process the ‘unique experiment’ because it gives ‘official recognition of ethnic diversity as a politically relevant fact’, away from typical experiences of post-colonial African states.<sup>79</sup> While its proponents describe it as ‘a guarantee for unity’, its detractors mostly from unitarist camp accuse the measure as ‘recipe for disintegration’,<sup>80</sup> ‘Balkanization of Ethiopia’ or simply dis,iss it as ‘tribalism’.<sup>81</sup> This in turn has to do with the contentions surrounding the history of creation of the modern Ethiopian state of what Merera calls ‘The Contradictory Intepretation of Ethiopian Historiography’ among those who run the competing idea of past conquest as ‘nation building thesis, ‘national oppression thesis’ and ‘colonial thesis’.<sup>82</sup> The ethno-national camp, from the ‘political periphery’, is in essence in support of the project of federal dispensation and self-rule for nationalities, but complains of a huge gulf between declaration and the operational reality.

### **The Discontents of Sidama Nation and the Quest for New Regional State**

#### *Arrival of EPRDF to the South and Responses*

The EPRDF who came to control political power and extend its control in southern areas and in Sidama was received with both hope and skepiticism. For the aim of extending its authority in the southern Ethiopia, the EPRDF incorporated the diverse ethno-linguistic groupings under a single political command and structure. As Donald Donham notes, the arrival of EPRDF in the political peripheries Ethiopia also ‘represented both changes from and continuities form the previous

<sup>76</sup> For more on this, see Henze, Paul B (1998), Ethiopia’s “Leap in the Dark”: Federalism and Self-determination in the New Constitution, *Journal of African Law*, 30 (1), pp. 19-38.

<sup>77</sup> See Lovise Aalen (2001); Merera Gudina (2003).

<sup>78</sup> Leenco Lata (2004), What Next in the Horn of Africa? Reconsidering the State and Self-determination, In Asafa Jalata (ed.), *State Crisis, Globalization and National Movements in the North East Africa*, New York: Routledge.

<sup>79</sup> Tobia Hagmann and Jon Abbink (2011), The Politics of Authoritarian Reform in Ethiopia, 1991-2012, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Vol. 5, Issue 4, (pp. 579-595).

<sup>80</sup> Lovise Aalen (2011), p. 2.

<sup>81</sup> See Minase Haile (1996), The New Ethiopian Constitution: Its Impacts upon Unity, Human Rights and Development, *Suffolk Transnational Law Review* 20 (1), pp. 1-84.

<sup>82</sup> Merera Gudina (2006), The Contradictory Interpretation of Ethiopian Historiography: The Need for New Consensus’, In David Turton (eds), *Ethnic Federalism*, *ibid*, (pp. 119-130).

regimes'.<sup>83</sup> It systematically orchestrated the establishment of Southern Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Front (SEPDP) in 1992. This was a coalition of more than 20 ethnic-based political organizations in which most of them were established by the EPRDF as Peoples Democratic Organizations (PDOs hereafter) from the various areas of the south by disregarding some of the existing political organizations.<sup>84</sup> According to Merera, PDOs is 'the strategy of manufacturing a political support base by creating controlled ethnic-based organizations for the various ethnic groups of the country'.<sup>85</sup> Vaughan and Tronvoll<sup>86</sup> also remarked that the EPRDF's cadres created PDOs in the south to move in their home areas in order to mobilize the people to facilitate the newly arrived EPRDF's rule. According to them, the PDOs system was meant to help the ruling party 'to speak through the mouths of other ethnic groups, win elections, and rule the peoples of Ethiopia'. Under this situation, Berhanu Gutema adds that the EPRDF coalition 'was formed not based on equal terms, rather based on client-patron relationship', in which the TPLF has acted as a patron that can protect, favor or punish and lead the other groups.<sup>87</sup> The coalition strategy generally enabled the Tigrayan ruling core to retain a leading political position by challenging or weakening those opposing ethnic based movements who did not want to organize themselves under the TPLF domination.<sup>88</sup> In September 2003, the SEPDP was reorganized by dissolving its 20 constituting organizations and merging their members into a single organization called Southern Ethiopia Peoples Democratic Movement (hereafter SEPDM) which currently rules the region.<sup>89</sup> In this way, by creating coalitions with other partner organizations, the TPLF was able to forge TPLF-dominated EPRDF in a bid to control political space in southern Ethiopia.

Seen in light of the foregoing, the coming of the TPLF with its EPRDF coat to southern areas was no more a blessing, speaking from the vantage point of the much needed case of regional autonomy for which some groups like the Sidama fought for. EPRDF's July Peace Conference noted the attendance of the two senior Sidama Liberation Movement's leadership.<sup>90</sup> In the 1992, the country saw a reconfiguration into different regional units as the ruling insurgents vowed to implement decentralization and autonomy for the ethno-national groups. Proclamation number 7/1992 established 14 regional units where Sidama, along with Gedeo, and Burji were arranged under then region 8 with regional capital at Hawassa. The Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM) was targeted through PDO system, and as renowned historian puts it, 'The experience of SLM in the 1990s was similar to that of other groups that sought to challenge the EPRDF. Any hopes that its members had of leading their community in the federal era were frustrated by the appearance of a Sidama PDO.'<sup>91</sup> Hopes evaporated as a sham Sidama PDO (Sidama People's Democratic Organization) was popped up to counteract the veteran nationalist SLM party who emerged as a potential challenge for the victorious TPLF seeking to control the Sidama area. In June 1992, SLM along with Oromo Liberation Front, was removed from the Transitional government, and they left it declaring to

<sup>83</sup> Donham Donald (2002) as cited in Lovise Aalen (2011), p. 96.

<sup>84</sup> Berhanu Gutema (2007) *Restructuring State and Society*, p. 147.

<sup>85</sup> Merera (2003), *Competing Ethnic Nationalism*, p. 146.

<sup>86</sup> Vaughan, S and Tronvoll, K (2003), *The Culture of Power in Contemporary Ethiopian Political Life*, Sida Studies, No 10, p 116.

<sup>87</sup> Berhanu Gutema (2003), p. 73

<sup>88</sup> Berhanu Gutema (2003), p. 73

<sup>89</sup> See Berhanu Gutema (2007), pp 72-73; Lovise Aalen (2011).

<sup>90</sup> Markakis, 2011, p. 285.

<sup>91</sup> Markakis, *ibid*, p. 285

resume the armed struggle.<sup>92</sup> Its armed men were violently disarmed and detained.<sup>93</sup> On 7 December 1992, while SLM was holding its general assembly at Hawassa, its leader Woldemmanuel Dubale barely escaped assassination attempt by the TPLF militias and he escaped to live in exile again<sup>94</sup>. Even after SLM defected to armed struggle against the intruding TPLF forces, the popular support continued to be strong in many remote parts of rural Sidama areas.<sup>95</sup> In this climate, unlike in smaller ethnic areas of south, it was not easy for TPLF to install quick control in Sidama. As Lovise Aalen remarkably observes:

[...] But for larger nationalities, which had been separate entities or dominant parts of larger administrative units under Haileselassie and the Derg, and which already had an educated elite and a group of experienced administrators, the appearance of the EPRDF and its creation of new elites was more difficult to swallow. This was the situation for [...] Sidama ...which had been relatively prominent group in the south during the two past regimes.<sup>96</sup>

Those areas that continued to support SLM and resisted the intrusion of Tigrayan soldiers in their area were ‘put under military grip and closer checks amongst the crucial middle class’.<sup>97</sup> These were effected through different tactics, including the use of violence, and later by the successive selection of the Sidamas for the position of regional presidency since 1991, and also later by making Hawassa, Sidama capital as a capital of the newly invented region of south.<sup>98</sup> Kifle Wansamo maintained that during this period:

“The people are directly and indirectly affected: some of them have suffered unjustified and prolonged imprisonment that left them in poverty. Many of the Sidama educated class have suffered persecution, imprisonment, and impoverishment mainly because of their refusal to join the government party, questioning some of the government policies, or belonging to the opposition parties. Some have left their zone, some others migrated...”<sup>99</sup>

This already created an image that the TPLF-led regime is not genuine in its approach to Sidama cause, and their hopes gradually drained. Accordingly, on the front of political organization, soon after the assumption of power, ‘the TPLF patched up surrogate parties such as the SPDO on 1 Nov. 1991 ‘to serve one and only one purpose: to become its puppets’.<sup>100</sup> As Seyoum rightly observed, the core members of SPDO included prisoners of war taken during armed confrontations with the Derg army and less educated, unemployed individuals with less critical stance to TPLF rule.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Vaughan, S (2003), *Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia* (PhD Dissertation, The University of Edinburgh).

<sup>93</sup> Markakis, (2011), *Ethiopia*, *ibid*, p. 286, Vaughan, 2003.

<sup>94</sup> Shiferaw Muleta (29 May 2019), *A Brief Political History of Sidama Nation for Self-rule*, *ibid*.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Kassa Adiso, veteran SLM field commander and resistance leader (Feb. 2015, Hawassa).

<sup>96</sup> Lovise Aalen (2011), *The Politics of Ethnicity*, *ibid*, p. 97.

<sup>97</sup> Vaughan, (2003), *ibid*.

<sup>98</sup> Vaughan, *ibid*, pp. 91 ff.

<sup>99</sup> Kifle Wansamo SJ, (2007), *Towards Building Stability*, *ibid*, p. 200.

<sup>100</sup> Seyoum Hameso, (2006), *The Sidama Nation*, *ibid*. Note that the name ‘Sidamo’ is derogatory. The true name is Sidama.

<sup>101</sup> Seyoum Hameso, (2006), *The Sidama Nation: An Introduction*, *ibid*.



## Some Factors Precipitating Discontent Among the Sidama Nation

### *Forced Merger of the Southern Peoples and the Dismantling of Sidama Region*

By using the transitional charter, the EPRDF started the project of restructuring the administrative map of the country. Sidama was granted with some smaller Cushitic neighbors such as Gedeo, Burji and Kore and designated as the then region eight under the centrality of Sidama. It was reported that these groups were in a full agreement about the arrangement.<sup>102</sup> After series of political undertakings and manipulations, the SNNPR was formulated as a unit as late as in 1994. This market the continuity from the historical repressive past which embodies inequality and left the issue of Sidama regional autonomy in stark question. It marked the beginning of contestation and unpeaceful relations between the regime and the Sidamas which is to dominate the political interactions in Sidama henceforth. During the rule of Haileselassie and the Derg, these southern areas were administered from the center through the provincial arrangements, and Kifle-hager and Awradja structures which were divided in to three major entities: Gamo-Gofa, Keffa and “Sidamo”.<sup>103</sup> As preceding sections revealed, even though the Sidamas lost their freedom and were subjected to neftegna-gebbar exploitative system in the hands of imperial feudal rule, they at least maintained their de facto autonomy. The then large territorial administration was named as “Sidamo” Tekilay-Guezat under the imperial regime. Later, the Derg made changes in names, but the similar administrative structures were employed. During Derg, the Sidamas were governed under the “Sidamo” Kifle-Hager as a larger provincial entity.

According to observers, during the first administrative phase, ‘groups of all sizes and with varying claims and credibility’ had been encouraged by the party to mobilize their population for self-determination. As EPRDF came to power in 1991, these southern areas became organized in to five regions given numbers from 5-11. These included Sidama, Omo, Kaffa, Guraghe-Hadiyya-Kambata and Wolayita.<sup>104</sup> However, the EPRDF started to reconsider its initial position and came with new vicious wisdom. Thereafter, as Vaughan observed, the government started to argue that, for the reason of budgetary efficiency, it made sense to consolidate the myriad zones, regions and political parties, some of which had recently emerged in response to these encouragements and those organized prior to that call. Through steady growth of manipulative and coercive measures devised by the TPLF in a way it ensures their hegemonic political position, the five autonomous regions were forcedly merged into one, and the new region emerged with the name SNNPR.<sup>105</sup> The merger of the south, however, remained a more of puzzle why the southern areas comprising of 56 NNPs were lumped together to create only one unit of the federation, and not as several regions. This happened despite the fact of extensive geographical and diverse ethnic groups with diverse cultures, languages and varied level of socio-economic development. This happened to the weighty dismay of the many political elites and the ethnic communities concerned who were fighting the old regimes to assert their proper political space in the country.<sup>106</sup> On the other hand, some writers

<sup>102</sup> Wolassa L. Kumo (2016), *ibid*, pp. 306.

<sup>103</sup> Some parts of the current SNNPR also belonged to other provinces like Bale, Arsi, Shoa and Illubabor. See Lovise Aalen (2002a), *Ethnic Federalism in a Dominant Party State: The Ethiopian Experience, 1991-2000*, Chr. Michelsen Institute, pp. 89-90.

<sup>104</sup> Aalen (2002), p. 90.

<sup>105</sup> Vaughan, S (2006), Responses to Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia’s Southern Region, In Turton (2006), *Ethnic Federalism*, p 188

<sup>106</sup> Interview with retired former official from Sidama (Feb. 2013, Hawassa).

seem to be content with the TPLF/EPRDF project of lumping together the different national/ethnic groups in south. Assefa Fisseha argues that that:

“ The south being composed of relatively smaller nationalities that benefit more from interdependence and some form of self-rule than from unitary system and independence, have a major potential role to play in bringing equilibrium to the two potential threats of the Ethiopian federation: centralism (as reflected in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) and secession (as some political elites seem to be aspiring for it).”<sup>107</sup>

However, this statement lacks justice in at least two respects. First it is erroneous to consider populous southern nations as smaller nationalities, for instance the Sidama alone, excluding 55 other ethnic groups, has a population as comparable as that of Tigray who was the sole arbiter in power and regional allocation. Secondly, one can see that, this statement runs the view that the southern national groups are not treated the way they wanted to be treated but has to be used as an instrument of moderating tensions between centralism and secessionist tendencies. Merera contends, on the other hand, that ‘such lumping together of the southern regions seems to be motivated by political expediency and to counterweight the most populous and vast Oromia region that can cast its shadow across the country, and administrative convenience for central control’.<sup>108</sup> Clapham also concurs with such view when he wrote ‘...these difficulties [counterbalancing Oromo, Amhara and other minor regions] have to some extent been managed through the creation of multi-nation states, with SNNPR as the most obvious example...’<sup>109</sup>

Sidama protested against the forced dismantling of its regional status.<sup>110</sup> Many people expressed their dissatisfaction with the fact that the entire southern and southwestern areas were administered as one, while for instance, the Harari people who comprise only 10 % of the population of the Harari region (and whose population does not exceed 200,000) have got their regional state. ‘Finally, and most controversially’, says Vaughan, ‘after several non-viable zones and regions were unceremoniously stuck back together, [in what some writers called “the repacking of the “Pandora’s Box”], a series of claims in 1990s, for recognition of separate status for ethnic or language groups and subgroups were either rejected or deferred’.<sup>111</sup>

Aalen documented that just before the regional merger took place, several EPRDF-affiliated PDOs in the region established one common political front, the SEPDF, and became a member of the EPRDF coalition. This followed the forced merger of then five autonomous southern regions. The sponsors of the idea-federal and regional officials- claim that the merger of the regions became as result of the regional party members’ ‘desire’ to utilize common resources and man-power in their respective administrations.<sup>112</sup> They implicitly present the merger as an initiative which came from the southerners themselves. But when it is inquired whether the political atmosphere of the day was conducive for taking own initiative to do so or when it was an interest on the part of the southern group to lose their autonomous existence and identity really makes the allegations of the

<sup>107</sup> Assefa Fisseha (2007), *Federalism and the Accommodation of Diversity in Ethiopia*, Nijmegen, Wolf Legal Publishers, p. 95?

<sup>108</sup> See Merera Gudina (2005), *Ethiopia: A Transition without Democratisation*, (Unpublished paper, AA University, p. 15.

<sup>109</sup> Clapham, Christopher (2006), ‘Afterword’ in Turton David (ed.) *Ethnic Federalism*, *ibid*, p. 233.

<sup>110</sup> See Wolassa L. Kumo (2016), *The Sidama Nation*, *ibid*, pp. 308-310.

<sup>111</sup> Vaughanm S (2006), *Responses to Ethnic Federalism*, *ibid*, p. 188.

<sup>112</sup> Lovise Aalen (2002a), p. 90.

rulers very questionable. On top of that, critics and opposition leaders of the time also claim that: "...the merger was an outcome of pressure from central party, which had a clear strategy of obtaining a firmer grip of regional affairs in the south. The EPRDF preferred to control the troublesome southern areas through single, rather than several federal units."<sup>113</sup> After conducting interviewing with the first and former SNNPR regional president Abate Kisho- who is now outside a party system- Lovise Aalen reveals that the merger was an imposed one. Abate argued: "the merger of the southern regions and the parties was the initiative of central party leadership. The southerners accepted it, but they would have never accepted it if the EPRDF had not done so".<sup>114</sup> In very recently in July 2018, in a certain regional gatherings, he openly admitted that they were forced to accept the proposal which according him 'they cannot try to resist'.

As noted above, rather than relying on the already established opposition parties, the TPLF gave some sort of military and political trainings and administrative positions to southerners who had been captured during the war.<sup>115</sup> This period experienced a shortage of skilled manpower and legitimacy among the population they claim to represent. As Seyoum Hamesso comprehends the TPLF's ill policy in Sidama region:

"By promoting the mediocre, the TPLF demoted independent, creative, and well-informed personalities as well as nationalist elders. The regime's supporters were promoted as models to be followed while creative and critical thinkers were discouraged and undermined. The regime has progressively excluded true nationalists from decision-making process. The regime's propaganda tools presented intellectuals and businesspersons from the south as enemies of the people or anti-people".<sup>116</sup>

According to Aalen, the first administrators in the region were, therefore, militarily dominated TPLF officials in the area.<sup>117</sup> Bitew Belay, whom she calls 'a viceroy of the south region'- embodying the authoritarian interference in the region- was a centrally appointed informal 'governor' in the name of 'advisor' assisting the regional president, Abate Kisho.<sup>118</sup> This person closely controlled the establishment and building the weak and unchallenging organization of South Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Front (SEPDF).<sup>119</sup> According to Lovise Aalen, many people mention that 'even if Bitew had no permanent portfolio, but in practice he was at the top of regional council-every decision of the regional council and the executive has to win his approval'.<sup>120</sup> So, it can be convincingly observed that the EPRDF has been instrumental in creating a loyal regional puppet ally, the SEPDF, and the region which emerged to be puppet of the TPLF machinery for over 27 years. There was no legitimacy and support from the peoples they claim to represent. Aalen critically notes that:

<sup>113</sup> Professor Beyene Petros quoted in Aalen (2002) p. 90.

<sup>114</sup> Aalen (2011), *Politics of Ethnicity*, p. 100.

<sup>115</sup> John, Young (1998), Regionalism and Democracy in Ethiopia, *Third World Quarterly* 19, pp. 191-204, p. 198.

<sup>116</sup> Seyoum Y. Hamesso (2006), A Sidama Nation, *ibid*, pp, 70-71.

<sup>117</sup> Lovise Aalen (2002; 2011).

<sup>118</sup> Aalen (2002). P. 90.

<sup>119</sup> See Aalen, *ibid*, p. 90

<sup>120</sup> Aalen, *ibid*.

“...the presence of TPLF officials and their [politico-military] intervention in the regional affairs have hampered the SEPDF in gaining legitimacy and genuine support from the local population. The major objective of the central involvement is apparently to defend the TPLF/EPRDF interests and ensure that the central party organization maintains the control of the region that it gained when Derg withdrew in 1991.”<sup>121</sup>

Many scholars and political elites from the southern ethnic groups, therefore, contend that there could not be sustainable constitutional-legal justifications for the imposed merger of the south. As observed by Berhanu Gutema, there was no clear explanation about the how the merger was initiated, negotiated and agreed.<sup>122</sup> He further argues that the merger decision was made through ‘close-door agreement among the self-appointed and systematically recruited ethnic organizations and individuals’ who acted in the name of the concerned people. The informants of this writer have also clearly demonstrated that systematic arrangement was what happened in Sidama as well. The people were nor consulted about both the dissolution of existing regions and what was to happen then-the ensuing forced merger. The situation of dismantling Sidama’s brief existed region and the consequences are well articulated by the close observer as follows:

“In 1993/4, Sidama as a region was dissolved and it was [forcedly] included in to the so called SNNPR with the political seat at Hawassa... Sidama were not consulted about the dissolution of their own region, nor about the imposed merger with the SNNPR. The TPLF/EPRDF leadership imposed its undemocratic and wrong beliefs and policies on the people of Sidama...to destroy [and undermine] Sidama nationalism. The contempt harbored by the TPLF rulers about the people and the forced marriage of the Sidama with the SNNPR meant that the emergence of conflict was inevitable.”<sup>123</sup>

Seyoum further noted that the response and justification of the TPLF for their rejection of autonomous regions in south can be evidenced by looking into lack of democracy and what democracy entails. Accordingly, he argued that ‘it is important for democracy that the population consents to the political structure proposed to it’.<sup>124</sup> He convincingly asks ‘has there ever been a time when the nations and peoples within the Ethiopian empire were asked to consent? Was the empire formed on consensual basis?’ He persuasively responds that ‘the answers are decidedly no’.<sup>125</sup> The claims of then new rulers about the consensual nature of SNNPR is, therefore rejected by both academics and the political elites of the region. Berhanu Gutema provides evidences from the prominent opposition leader Prof. Beyene Petros and then regional executive council member Teferra Meskela.<sup>126</sup> He points out that they have admitted that ‘the decision was imposed on them by the EPRDF, in inconsistency with and contrary to the agreed covenant or transitional charter’.<sup>127</sup> The Sidama zonal council, in its minutes of 2<sup>nd</sup> round 9<sup>th</sup> regular session (2005) also clearly

<sup>121</sup> Aalen, *ibid*, p. 90.

<sup>122</sup> Berhanu Gutema Balcha (2007), *Restructuring State and Society*, *ibid*, p. 92

<sup>123</sup> Seyoum Y. Hamesso (2002), *The Politics of Genocide: The Case of Sidama*, A Paper Presented at a TBOA Congress in Frankfurt and OSA Conference in Washington DC.

<sup>124</sup> Seyoum (2006), *ibid*.

<sup>125</sup> Seyoum, 2006, *ibid*.

<sup>126</sup> Teferra Meskela has been head of the Regional Political Affairs Bureau in SNNPR during early days, and he was considered as instrumental in the political riddles taking place in the region in those days.

<sup>127</sup> Berhanu Gutema (2007), *Restructuring the State and Society*, *ibid* p. 97.

confirmed that the merger was fundamentally imposed one in which there was not even mundane freedom for deliberation and consultation.<sup>128</sup> Sidama attempted to exert a fierce resistance against the coercive dismantling of their regional statehood.<sup>129</sup> According to commentator, the move of merger ‘was objected by Sidama representatives within EPRDF, which forced many of the SPDO members to withdraw from the party and to continue their struggle from abroad. Prominent figures in this regard include Tufa Doyicha, the zonal president by then and others ....’<sup>130</sup> This followed a wave of attacks by the TPLF system. As one survivor notes it:

The TPLF forcefully amalgamated the Sidama people with 55 ethnic groups in 1993/94. At that time, many Sidamas strongly opposed this action, but the TPLF arrested and then torched them in jails of Hawassa, Jinka, Gidole, and even in highly hot places of Tigray, in hidden jails known as ‘06’ wherein most of these citizens from the Sidama still didn’t come back here till now.<sup>131</sup>

Whatsoever was the justification for the enforced ethnic amalgamation in the south, it is adequately clear now that the initiative was from the EPRDF itself and the project was enforced one. But, such kind of reckless political decision has led to troubles and discontents one again in the region. It should have been decided in an open and transparent manner in full consultation and compromise with the concerned peoples. However, this good faith wish could not fit with the TPLF’s Machiavellian power culture of domination and imposition. Finally, and indeed, unfortunately, the merger was formally endorsed by the 1995 FDRE constitution, which itself sustains several challenges for its legitimacy in design and making. The constitution came up with only nine ‘National Regional States’ comprising of the federation.<sup>132</sup> Ultimately, given the above series of political developments and processes, it is exceedingly difficult to claim that the merger of the five autonomous southern regions to form the SNNPR is ‘an initiative from the NNPs concerned to commonly utilize their resources’. This only fueled Sidama resentment. As Markakis observes:

“Sidama *kilil* [region] became a zone in Debub *kilil*, but the peoples’ aspiration was for *kilil* of their own with Hawassa as its capital. Sidama resentment was fed by a widespread feeling of having lost territory and status in the federal carve up, and the fact that with the population nearly as large as Tigray, the subsidy for Sidama Zone was only a fraction of the former’s”.<sup>133</sup>

It informs us of what the Ethiopian scholar calls ‘the original sins of the Ethiopian federalism’.<sup>134</sup> It is simply irresponsible political cover to justify erroneous conducts of the political actors, who aspire to sustain their hegemonic power positions in the country’s body politics. Ultimately, I argue that this phenomenon is hard to combine with the ultimate goal of national struggles, the federal option presented thereafter, and the aim of then ‘Transitional Charter’ which gave the NNPs the

<sup>128</sup>. See a Document ‘Sidama Peoples Demand for Regional Status through Woreda and Zonal Councils’ (Amharic Unpublished document presented to the Regional Council), August 2005, p. 2.

<sup>129</sup> Markakis, 2011, pp. 285-286.

<sup>130</sup> Shiferaw Muleta (May 2019), *A Brief Political History of Sidama Nation for Self-rule*, Addis Standard, Special edition, p. 6.

<sup>131</sup> Daniel Biramo, 06/1/19, personal note.

<sup>132</sup>. See Art. 47 of the FDRE Constitution.

<sup>133</sup> John Markakis, (2011), p. 286.

<sup>134</sup> Yonatan Tesfaye (2017), ‘The Original Sins of Ethiopian Federalism’ *Ethnopolitics*, Volume 16, Issue 3, pp. 232-245.

right to self-determination up to and including secession. And, arguably, this forced merger of the autonomous regions in to one basket which largely remained unresponsive to the growing needs of the peoples partly explains the recurrent crisis and prevalent friction and violence in the region today.

### **Post-Merger Administrative Situations in SNNPR**

Like the case of Sidama people, the SNNPR did not receive equal treatment in growing research interest in Ethiopian federal dispensation. Today, the SNNPR, which has come out of the above imprudent political processes, is ‘characterized by an extreme diversity in terms of ethnic composition’<sup>135</sup> with diverse languages and cultures belonging to the Cushitic, Omotic, Semetic and Nilotic language families. As Jan Erk notes, “...The formulation also happens to be in the title of one of its most diverse regional states, the SNNPR. [...] Furthermore, some consider themselves ‘nations’; others prefer to use ‘nationality’ as a self-designation; yet others see themselves as a ‘people’.”<sup>136</sup> Only five of these ethnic groups have a population of more than one million (Sidama, Guraghe, Wolayita, Hadiya and Gamo) whereas the remaining 30 ethnic groups have less than 10,000 populations.<sup>137</sup> Since its establishment, the region has witnessed two constitutions; it has adopted its first constitution in 1995 which was int urn replaced in 2001 by SNNPR ‘Revised Constitution’. This latter constitution attempted to correct some of the flaws in the previous one.<sup>138</sup> Until very recently, the region was structured in to 13 zones and 8 special woredas.<sup>139</sup> Yet, similar to the case at federal level, not all ethnic groups have their own zones/special woredas though the constitution authorizes each ethnic group to have its own administration.<sup>140</sup> As a result, even those who are termed to have zonal or special woreda status are not structured in the way that enables them to exercise local autonomy, or ethnic self-determination. This is because, the revised regional constitution itself clearly declares that ‘the zone and special woreda administration is the administrative hierarchy next to the region’,<sup>141</sup> which puts zones under regional grip of control.

### **The Looqqe Massacre of May 2002 and Its Implication**

The arbitrary and discriminatory treatment of the southern Ethiopian people by lumping them together under one unresponsive region with no mechanism and political will to respond to their political and development concerns has been remained a deep-seated concern. This happened

<sup>135</sup> See Van der Beken, C (2013), Federalism in a Context of Extreme Ethnic Pluralism: The Case of Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples, *Verfassung und Recht in Ubersee VRU* 46.

<sup>136</sup> Jan Erk, Nations, Nationalities and Peoples: The Ethnopolitics of Ethnofederalism in Ethiopia, *Ethnopolitics*, Vol 16 Issue 3 (June 2017) pp. 219-231.

<sup>137</sup> See for example 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia, Central Statistics Agency (SCA, 2007).

<sup>138</sup> For a treatment of sub-national constitutions in Ethiopia, See Van Der Beken, Christophe (2017), *Completing the Constitutional Architecture: A Comparative Analysis of Sub-national Constitutions in Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa University Press.

<sup>139</sup> The zones included Sidama, Guraghe; Hadiya; Kambata-Tembarro; Kaffa; Shekka; Gdeo; Silte; Wolayita; Gamo-Goffa; Dawro; Benchi-Maji; and South Omo (South Omo itself is a multi-ethnic zone with over 15 ethnic groups). The special woredas included: Alaba; Yem; Konta; Basketo; Konso; Burji; Derashe; and Amaro.

<sup>140</sup> See Van Der Becken, Christophe (2013), Federalism in a Context of Extreme Ethnic Pluralism, *ibid*, p. 8.

<sup>141</sup> Article 80 of the Revised SNNPR constitution. The SNNPR constitution of June 1995 was revised in 2001 with the purpose of broadening powers of constituent communities by stressing ethnic diversity of the regional state. Other purposes also included the need to ensure better form of governance through separation of powers among government organs. See Preamble to the Revised 2001 Constitution. See also Berhanu Gutema (2007), p. 193.

while there is official constitutional promise for the right to self-administration, and this has already tended to breed a strong resentment that could flare up into violence. This happened in some occasions, in Sidama for example between the people and political actors as we shall see below. In North Omo, a Woga-Goda language project was attempted which induced fierce resistance.<sup>142</sup>

The administrative instability in Sidama, for instance, is a recurring phenomenon where the Sidamas most of the time tend to reject the southern amalgamation by forwarding different justifications. Critics of the regime argue that the later deliberately maintained such status-quo to curb and undermine Sidamas' aspiration for higher level administrative hierarchy-in which the Sidamas are supposed to be preoccupied with their own internal affairs of political instability and divisions among the elites on clan basis.<sup>143</sup> Because of arbitrary restructuring of southern states and imposed merger in to the SNNPR framework, many claim that the fundamental constitutional entitlement of the NNPs are severely curtailed. This has been further exacerbated by the competing ethnic elites' aspirations to self-identity; this also being severely hampered by the aggressive and containing policy of the ruling regime.<sup>144</sup>

Sidama unwaveringly protested against the dismantling of its autonomous region justifying its long-lasting past struggle against oppression and dictatorship of military rule.<sup>145</sup> The serious of political protests met with violent crackdown and incarceration of some renowned personalities, some killed, and whereabouts of others remained unknown throughout TPLF rule. Since then, the relationship between the Sidama public and the late regime of TPLF remained significantly strained and fraught with serious frictions. The regime who engrained deep suspicion on Sidama people found good opportunity to silence them in later years. This significantly terrible event happened in May 16, 2002 when EPRDF's southern security forces took one of the most brutal massacre on the peaceful marching civilian demonstrators. The immediate cause of the demonstration and consequent crackdown was the move by the regional government to forcefully withdraw the political power of Sidamas on their capital Hawassa which has been a municipality under Sidama zone. At the end of the 1990s, the government began to reconsider the reorganization of the municipality with the suggested solution to take Hawassa out of Sidama and to be designated as a municipality accountable to the regional (or federal) government. It was well coincided with another important political event in the region where the former regional president Abate Kisho was imprisoned and replaced by Hailemariam Desalegn from Wolayita nationality-key competing groups in the regional political leadership. Despite the proposal of the ruling party to impose obedience, the Sidama zonal administration fiercely opposed what it called 'offending anti-Sidama government proposal'. This led to nurturing of resistance spirit by linking these issues to the wider and immortal struggle for regional status for Sidama<sup>146</sup> which has been claimed from conquest in its older version, and since the merger in EPRDF era.

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<sup>142</sup> See Lovise Aalen (2011).

<sup>143</sup> Interview with Sidama political elite (March 2013, Hawassa).

<sup>144</sup> For early assessment of SNNPR on this point, see Jon Abbink (19998), *New Configurations of Ethiopian Ethnicity: The Challenge of the South*, *North East African Studies*, Vol. 5 No. 1 pp. 59-80.

<sup>145</sup> Markakis, 2011, Vaughan, 2003, 2006; Yonatan T Fissaha and Biniam Membereworq (2019, *infra*).

<sup>146</sup> Lovise Aalen (2013), *The Politics of Ethnicity*, p. 149.

This measure to make Hawassa under the regional administrative control where Sidamas would have no voice, harnessed insecurity among them culminating in popular protest.<sup>147</sup> The popular protest resulted in the brutal massacre of the tens of peaceful demonstrators and wounded hundreds by the government security forces on 24 May 2002.<sup>148</sup> On that day, an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 people gathered on the southern outskirts of Hawassa locally known as Looqqe.<sup>149</sup> As noted, the demonstrators had to interrelated agenda: the first one was that the government should restore the long-debated regional status for Sidama; and secondly, to demand the regional government to retract the Hawassa proposal where the people demanded that the city should be accountable to Sidama administration. Lovise Aalen underscores the following account:

“...some of the demonstrators’ slogans proclaimed, “our question will be solved only by the EPRDF”. The message was clear: the demonstrators were not against EPRDF per se but against the decision made by the regional administration and an administration staffed by the officials who were perceived to oppose the Sidama cause. But the EPRDF-controlled government took harsh measures against the peaceful demonstrators. The police started shooting at the people who were peaceful and unarmed.”<sup>150</sup>

Another strong critique of such ruthless government reaction came from the Amnesty International whose report indicates the brutality of the government’s reaction partly as: “On 24 May in ‘Awassa’ [Amharized name of Hawassa], capital of Sidama zone in the southern region, regional and federal forces killed and wounded others at a demonstration which was peaceful until police shot without warning. By November ...many people remained in custody without being charged...”<sup>151</sup> The regime was, hence, harshly criticized by human rights organizations and national governments for its abusive conducts and violences.<sup>152</sup> Through the organized political violence, the accountability of the city administration was taken away from the Sidama and given to regional government by SNNPR city proclamation no. 52/2002.

Lovise Aalen in her recent work notes about a widely held view that ‘the lingering disputes on the status of Hawassa city and the regional issues are the major causes of the extremely high turn-over of the zone presidents in Sidama since 1991.’<sup>153</sup> In this regard, as one notable Sidama writer remarked, ‘the Sidama administrative sub-region (also called zone) witnessed 11 administrative changes in 13 years, one informer (leader) serving less than 1.1 years’.<sup>154</sup> The same observer notes

<sup>147</sup> Seyoum Y. Hameso (2006). *A Sidama Nation*, *ibid*, p. 71.

<sup>148</sup> Markakis, 2011, p. 286.

<sup>149</sup> The then administrator of Sidama zone, Girma Chulluqe was also with the gatherers. Initially, he was advising the people not to stage demonstration revealing that the government has already deployed the military which may take immediate action. As the public was not willing to give up demonstration, he also joined them claiming that he would also prefer to be killed with his people.

<sup>150</sup> Lovise Aalen (2013), *The Politics of Ethnicity*, p. 150.

<sup>151</sup> Amnesty International (2003), *Amnesty International Report 2003-Ethiopia*, 28 May 2003, available at <http://www.rewfold.org/docid/3edb47d5a.html> (accessed 7 May 2013). For a national level discussion, See Tronvoll, Kjetill (2008), *Human Rights Violations in Federal Ethiopia: When Ethnic Identity is a Political Stigma*, *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 15, (pp. 49-79), p. 26.

<sup>152</sup> Seyoum Hameso, (2006), *The Sidama Nation*, *ibid*.

<sup>153</sup> See Lovise Aalen (2011), *The Politics of Ethnicity*, *ibid*.

<sup>154</sup> See Wolassa (2013, *infra*). After the EPRDF came to power, the following personalities served as chief administrators of Sidama zone respectively: Tuffa Doyicha (1991-94); Seifu Tadesse (Jan. 1995-June 1995); Waqayyo Damassa 9July 1995-Nov 1997); Asfaw Dingamo (Feb. 1997-1998); Legesse Wolde (1998-1999); Birru Bale (Sept 2000-June 2001); Girma Chulluqqe (June 2001-Sept 2002- during Looqqe incident); Adane Dingamo (Dec 2003-March 2004); Geremew Garje Gidawo (March 2004-Oct 2006-



that,"Once again, one cannot imagine economic and social progress as well as provision of social justice with such highly volatile political environment in which the zonal leadership is changed twice in a year. The irony is that, the volatility is deliberately maintained by the regime that claims to be champion of the oppressed peoples'.<sup>155</sup> The desires of the regime, through the frequent change of the zone executives, is to maintain its power base by creating the feeling of insecurity and also divisions among the Sidama elites so that they could easily keep keep them divided and keep southern areas under their control. The zone officials have come and gone amid accusations that they 'have mobilized in favor of regional status for Sidama or status of Hawassa and several have been accused of having links to Sidama Liberation Movement',<sup>156</sup> a veteran Sidama opposition originated during anti-Derg days of struggle. Some core of the SEPDM leadership represented by former regional President, Shiferaw Shigute refute such claims saying that the zonal executives were frequently dismissed not because of their ties to Sidama struggle, but due to their incompetence.<sup>157</sup> As Christoph Stefes notes, the authoritarian ruleers take harsh measures against people's quest, "such as imprisonment and torture, or the abduction ... of opponents of the regime, are a double-edged sword. They make the oppressed more fearful and more compliant; but they can also spur on the opposition."<sup>158</sup> In this line, 'authoritarian regimes have not been legitimized by free and fair elections. Their power is based on violence and oppression'.<sup>159</sup>

The Looqqe demonstrators, their families and the entire Sidama people paid a heavy price in the struggle for the Sidamas' constitutional right to internal self-determination. Owing to its authoritarian political culture, violent government reaction terrorizing ordinary people in Ethiopia,<sup>160</sup> including the Sidamas and their officials are common. The big crime for officials under this regime, however, is when the officials happen to voice the concerns of the people they rule. Party interest primacy is the rule for Marxist-guerilla TPLF leadership. As a result of the violence, Hawassa was annexed from the Sidama administration and put under the direct administration of the regional executive in May 2003, which clearly contravenes the constitution. The claim of the regional party seems that since the city is a multiethnic in character, Sidama control is not welcome exercise. But the more hidden motive is to silence the Sidamas desire to establish their own region by making the city the capital of their would-be region, by further downgrading their status in the city.

The worst of all, those culprits and then regional officials who ordered the mass killings and responsible for the use of excessive military force against the peaceful demonstrators were not interrogated and held accountable. Many Sidamas and specially families of the victims resent for their lack of any reparative measures. As closer observers put it, the culprits were promoted to the

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during 2005 regional claim); Ake Hidanna (Oct. 2006-Jan. 2008); Dase Dalke (January 2008 – Nov. 2011); Million Mawos (Nov. 2011- Oct. 2012); Akililu Adula (Oct. 2012-July 2018); Qarre Chawicha ( from July 27, 2018 to July 2019); and Desta Ledamo (from August 2019).

<sup>155</sup> . Wolassa.

<sup>156</sup> Lovise Aalen (2011), *The Politics of Ethnicity*, p. 150.

<sup>157</sup> . But as a complete cadre and party bossy baptized with TPLF spirit, it is difficult to believe in the credibility of his refuting statement. It is rather due to party's suspicious belief that causes dismissal of officials before they finish their first-year term.

<sup>158</sup> . Christoph Stefes cited in DW, *How Do Dictatorships Survive* (available: <https://www.dw.com/en/how-do-dictatorships-survive/a-17062347>).

<sup>159</sup> . Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Jalata, A. (2010), The Ethiopian State: Authoritarianism, Violence and Genocide, *The Journal of Pan-African Studies*, Vol. 3.

prominent regional and federal level positions at the expense of the blood of innocent Sidama civilians. Contrary to this, they were later promoted to top federal leadership positions. Some others were appointed as Ambassadors, which is 'essentially seen as a reward for supporting the central SEPDM/EPRDF leadership for its stance against the Sidamas.'<sup>161</sup> Today, there is increasingly assertive call for justice and bringing culprits to justice, and reparation for the victims and their families. This neglect of the victims shows the regime's complete or low commitment to safeguard the rights and legitimate claims of the people, and this is perhaps one of the fundamental causes of prevalent distrust between the concerned people and the central rulers.<sup>162</sup>

The *Looqqe* massacre gave rise to a volatile political atmosphere in Sidama region. Most of the people were systematically removed from the town and sent to districts in the name of restructuring of the civil services. Hundreds of ethnic Sidama civil servants were removed from their jobs following the massacre. Many civil servants have also fled the country. As Seyoum notes, in Sidama history, mass emigration took place only twice. The first was during the war of 1977-1983 (commonly referred to as *dartu waro* or *shibbirrete waro*, roughly era of emigration or terrorism) between Sidama freedom fighters and the military Derg regime. And the second was during and after the massive human rights abuses following the May 24/2002 Looqqe Massacre.<sup>163</sup> Moreover, several hundred ethnic Sidama members of the regional police force have been removed for the alleged support of the cause of Sidama people. On the other hand, the naïve loyalists were promoted to lucrative positions. The continued suppression of the fundamental democratic right by using violence and, adds one writer, 'naïve loyalists who end up in jail turn by turn is likely to produce worse problems'.<sup>164</sup>

A tireless attempt to annex Hawassa from Sidama by joint action of regional ruling party and its collaborator actors continue to color political relations in the region has become a thorny issue. The Hawassa case resembles, to a certain extent, the claims of Oromo people over city of Addis Ababa/Finfinnee. However, there is a significant deviation in case of SNNPR constitution. The FDRE constitution of 1995 under its Article of 49 promised to protect 'the special interest of Oromia over Addis Ababa', whereas one cannot find such privilege clauses for Sidama people in the case of SNNPR revised constitution of 2001. In the absence of such clause, the Sidama argue, a huge revenue generated from Hawassa and its outskirts engulfed by the fast sprawling city, are not shared for the Sidamas which they claim, embodies economic injustice, and inconsistent application of laws and policies.<sup>165</sup>

Following the massacre of the peaceful Sidama demonstrators in Looqqe, the Sidama nation has witnessed unprecedented abuse of their rights and subjected to traumatization. In the words of

<sup>161</sup> Lovise Aalen, 2011, p. 151.

<sup>162</sup> Interview. For a thorough critique of the human rights situation in Ethiopia, see Human Rights Watch (2010), *Development Without Freedom: How Aid Underwrites Repression in Ethiopia*, New York, USA. See also Kjetil Tronvoll (2008), *ibid*.

<sup>163</sup> See Seyoum Y. Hamesso (2007), *The Diaspora Identity Formation and Forced Flight of the Sidamas* (available: [http://www.sidama.org/documents/Sidama\\_diaspora.pdf](http://www.sidama.org/documents/Sidama_diaspora.pdf)).

<sup>164</sup> Wolassa L. Kumo, *Sidama: An Overview of History, Culture and Economy* (Part I and II, available: <http://www.afroarticles.com/article-dashboard/Article/Wolassa-Kumo-and-the-Independence-Struggle-for-the-Sidama-Land/226236>).

<sup>165</sup> Interview, with young Sidama opposition member, (March 2013, Hawassa). See also Wolassa, *ibid*.

eminent historian, this epoch was “followed by a wave of mass arrests”<sup>166</sup> where torture, harassment, and intimidation became the order of the day. The abuse of human rights in these manners is held to be continued also these days because the people have intensified their struggle for recognition of regional status. As Seyoum reported, the massacre, ‘which is the part of the ongoing process of genocide, remains in the collective consciousness of the Sidama public’.<sup>167</sup> Writing about the Igbo’s case after the collapse of Biafra’s struggle in Nigeria, Crawford Young maintains that “[...] so great a trauma cannot vanish without leaving indelible marks on society”.<sup>168</sup>

As Wolassa notes, the Sidama people ‘have been living in the present land of Hawassa for over 1000 years. It is impossible to rewrite the history of the Hawassa land by denying the right of the Sidama people to ownership of the Hawassa city, which rightfully belongs to them’.<sup>169</sup> There is increasing claim today by some contending groups that the Hawassa city should be completely withdrawn from political influence of the Sidama and be handed-over to federal government on the basis of the argument that the city is multi-ethnic. Their argument, mostly launched by unitarist actors nostalgic for yesteryears of exclusion and domination,<sup>170</sup> goes to the extent that if Sidama is to gain a regional status, it should leave Hawassa (which is currently its capital) for other rural towns. The Sidama elites consider this conspiracy as the insult mounted on the Sidama and, this again breeds a feeling of discontent among the elites and may harm peaceful social coexistence which characterized the city in its history. The usual claim for its multiethnic composition is not solely unique character the Hawassa city alone. It is a nation-wide aspect which demand a correct and tenable nation-wide policy. Until such task commences, selective and inconsistent impositions of rules and procedures in Sidama, often by disregarding the needs of the historical dwellers of Sidama, and which according to Berhanu may be ‘motivated by the punitive measures’, could easily trigger resent and opposition as it has been the case thus far. ‘Close negotiation and bargaining could have produced a win-win solution, instead of the forceful imposition of rules that reduces the constitution privileges and benefits of the Sidama administration that has been producing fierce resistance’.<sup>171</sup> It is ultimately argued that inconsistent applications of constitutional principles and rules within the same country would only increase the resentment and the determination of Sidama people to fight for ‘their autonomy’. As a possible transitory suggestion, it is better to map out a countrywide strategy that can protect the rights of the ethnically mixed urban dwellers in different multiethnic constituencies<sup>172</sup> without unjustifiably suppressing the identities and legitimate empowerment of ethnic dwellers. Sidama paid dearly in souls over the years and consider the city as their historical heritage, deep inbuilt in the psychological beliefs, and seem largely unbearable for them tolerate whichever antagonistic political measures to disempower their position. To conclude, contrary to its silencing mission, however, the Looqqe atrocity and subsequent politically repressive measures precipitated resentment and bolstered

<sup>166</sup> John Markakis, 2011, p. 286, *ibid*.

<sup>167</sup> As part of the ongoing struggle for justice and self-determination, the day of Looqqe Massacre has been commemorated in homeland and Diaspora.

<sup>168</sup> Young Crawford, (2012), *The Post-Colonial State in Africa: Fifty Years of Independence 1960-2010*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, p. 240.

<sup>169</sup> Wolassa L. Kumo (2016), p. 307.

<sup>170</sup> Hailegebriel G. Feyissa (18 June 2018), *Sidama’s Quest for Statehood and the Question of Hawassa: A Sidama Nationalist’s View*, Addis Standard, (available: <http://addisstandard.com/opinion-sidamas-quest-for-statehood-and-the-question-of-hawassa/>)

<sup>171</sup> See Berhanu Gutema (2007), *Restructuring State and Society*, *ibid*, p. 215.

<sup>172</sup> See for example, Berhanu Gutema (2007).

Sidama nationalism which led to the continued intensification of the quest for regional autonomy. This was culminated in the approval of the quest for statehood by the zonal council in July 2005.<sup>173</sup> The political wind, blowing quite opposed direction reversed the smooth culmination of the process. They are once again destined to raise the same old question afresh, and continue to face the same old TPLF era's brutal measures.

### **Discontents of Lack of Proportionate Economic Benefits**

As Solomon Dersso remarks, the claims for meaningful political participation and 'equitable socio-economic order' are responsible for political frictions between and among various groups.<sup>174</sup> This is also the case and main concern in the Sidama zone as many informants usually complain that the Sidama areas have been suffering from lack of development initiatives. It is alleged that the regime assigns a specially selected loyalists who often lack education and experience to serve as the genuine and legitimate representatives of the people. The purpose of selecting these loyalists people is to use them as informers to the central TPLF leadership instead of holding treating them genuine leaders of their people. According to critics, whenever the informers fail to inform properly, or try to voice little concern about the immediately under the guise of 'performance assessment' or 'corruption' and subsequently are either sent to jails in Hawassa and Addis Ababa or are dismissed and left jobless.<sup>175</sup> This remained a conspicuous reality over the years which foreshadowed that supporting popular cause clearly would lead to risking punitive measures. The Sidama elites are of the opinion that this derives from the strategic plan of the regime to suppress the Sidama struggle for regional self-determination which the regime successfully reduced to the struggle for regional status. The regional questions are crucial in today's Ethiopian political-administrative in that most of the benefits and privileges are associated with one's administrative hierarchy. The Sidama public and elites believe that Sidama as a nation with an estimated population of over 5 million people have undisputed democratic right to be autonomous regional state in Ethiopia.

Generally, contemporary Sidama is characterized by a very low level of economic and infrastructural development.<sup>176</sup> There is even no asphalt road which connects or crosscuts Sidamaland. The only long-serving one was very old remnant built by the Italians in 1930s which connects Hawassa with Dilla town (about 80 km) which is now damaged. As of today, the Sidama economy is based primarily on subsistence economy characterized by archaic production mechanisms. However, a substantial proportion of the Sidamaland produces coffee which is the major cash crop in the area. Coffee has been a major source of income for the rural households in the coffee producing Sidama regions. Nevertheless, the recent plunge in international coffee price coupled with the inimical economic policy of the government on Sidama drew most of these households back into the subsistence production and absolute poverty. Although agriculture is a key to the development of the country and localities, the successive regimes failed to successfully transform the traditional agriculture in Ethiopia. So coffee, khat and enset crops which grow

<sup>173</sup> For more on this see infra. See also Lovise Aalen (2011), *The Politics of Ethnicity*, ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Solomon Ayele Dersso (2012), *Taking Ethno-Cultural Diversity Seriously in Constitutional Design: A Theory of Minority Rights for Addressing Africa's Multiethnic Challenge*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

<sup>175</sup> Wolassa (2007, 2013), Seyoum (2006, 2007).

<sup>176</sup> Wolassa L. Kumo (2013), *Sidama: An Overview of History, culture*, ibid.

abundantly in Sidama couldn't transform or else support the lives of most people who are now being attacked by a hitherto unimagined wave of hunger in Sidama history.

Recent studies have shown that Sidama society has faced shortage of food and hunger that is unknown in its long history.<sup>177</sup> Until recent episode, the Sidama people have had never faced hunger and famine in the history of their society. The society has been characterized by what one may call the long run equilibrium who were even at a better economic situation compared with the other parts of the country. Despite this fact, the subsistence nature of backward agricultural production coupled with vagaries of nature and massive growth of rural population and inimical government measures made some part of the Sidamaland prone to frequent hunger and famine that also characterizes the country. And some areas also were hit by famine for which the state gave no attention, 'thanks to a deliberate government policy of underdevelopment' of Sidama. Recently, a study conducted in one of the food insecure areas in Sidama region of Boricha district found out that "[...]like other parts of the country, the study area has its own recurrent [food shortage] hazards with their effects on the livelihood of the people and...[Against these hazards], commonly employed response strategies included reduction of non-essential expenditures, livestock sales, migration, casual work, and petty trade are among [them]" (emphasis added).<sup>178</sup>

As the prominent figure in mobilization of development projects remarks, since 1994, the Government of Ireland embarked on bilateral development initiatives in Ethiopia', which also supported development initiatives in Sidama region.<sup>179</sup> Previously, most of the relief efforts were provided by Irish Aid under the supervision of the independent local NGO, the Sidama Development Corporation (SDC).<sup>180</sup> The SDC is a grassroot non-profit organization established in 1997 to help reduce poverty and foster sustainable development in Sidama.<sup>181</sup> As Seyoum observes, its express mission was to harness human and physical resources of Sidama so that the people could address the fundamental obstacles to development. As familiar development economist notes, the idea to establish SDC came from the Sidama people including those working Sidama Development Programme (SDP) funded by Irish Aid since 1994.<sup>182</sup> The Irish Aid program has assisted in the establishment of SDC, both in terms of creating the critical awareness among the population through integrated rural development and making the resources available for the establishment of the organization itself.<sup>183</sup> The founder and director of SDC, Dr. Wolassa Lawisso made significant effort to secure external resources to help secure the development efforts to Sidama area. He was forced to resign in April 2002, and immediately forced to flee the country.<sup>184</sup> The Sidama public today widely recognize their team's efforts and honor him as development precursor and champion. Under his and his leadership, education institution widespread, financial

<sup>177</sup> Wolassa L. Kumo (2016), *The Sidama Nation*, ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Bichaye Tesfaye (2011), *Rural Household Food Security Analysis: The Case of Boricha Woreda, Sidama zone* (Unpublished MA Thesis, Addis Ababa University), p. 62.

<sup>179</sup> Wolassam p. 406.

<sup>180</sup> Seyoum Y. Hameso (2006), *Sidama Nation: An Introduction*, p. 71-72.

<sup>181</sup> For a detailed account of its works, aspirations and processes, see Wolassa L. Kumo (2016), pp. 399-435.

<sup>182</sup> Wolassa; Seyoum, (2006: 72).

<sup>183</sup> Wolassa (2013, 2016).

<sup>184</sup> Seyoum (2006), p. 72. Dr Wolassa and his team were instrumental in the establishment of pivotal projects such as SDP, SDC, Furra Institute, Yirgalem Radio, Hawassa City Center Market Complex, Gudumale center, Sidama Microfinance Institute, and many other assets, which were later derailed by regime's measures and set to feed cadres and their pockets, as critics describe them.

pooling self-help institutions and other ensure helping ensure the general welfare of Sidama society were widely carried out. However, the EPRDF regime started to reverse the direction. As a closer witness puts it:

“After 8 years of funding, Ireland made a U-turn in its development aid philosophy and unilaterally withdrew funding to Sidama area based programme. ...importantly, the Ethiopian government began to lose appetite for the idea of direct funding to the programme areas and openly demanded the Irish government to channel the bilateral funds to the central government treasury....Ireland had no choice but renege on its commitment to the Sidama people and run away from Sidama region. At present Ireland is one of the key donors to the Ethiopian central government but all development projects initiated by them have been suspended in the Sidama province.”<sup>185</sup>

While the same author admits that continued dependence on aid is ‘undesirable’, however, he cautions that an abrupt discontinuation of a program without clear exit strategy was equally disastrous, as happened to the Sidama Development Programme’.<sup>186</sup> As the informants indicate, the party apparatus who closely monitor development progresses in Sidama began to unleash trouble, imprison and ruthlessly suppress the popular leaders or force them to flee the country. Also, other notable young Sidama intellectuals and activists were either suppressed or forced to live in exile. In this way, as Seyoum notably underscored, the series of political and economic injustice led to the development of Sidama nationalism.<sup>187</sup> Accordingly, as a reaction to the trauma of continued domination, the Sidama are experiencing a wave of what some called ‘nostalgia’ in appraising genuine Sidama identity.<sup>188</sup>

### **The Grievances on Unfair Budgetary Allocation and Unbalanced Political Representation**

One of the justifications provided by the Sidama zonal council for its decision to demand for regional status was the argument that Sidama zone suffered from discrimination in the regional distribution of country’s resources. It is widely held that the resources and benefits from Sidama areas are not shared to the Sidama in an equitable manner. There is a widely co held grievances that the incomes generated from resources and cash crops in these areas are diverted to other parts of the ruling group’s constituency or their clientelist networks. On top of that, compared to other regions, Sidama receives a budget that was largely disproportionate and too small compared to its immense contribution for national economy, the budget that is inconsiderate of huge Sidama population and prevalent socio-economic problems<sup>189</sup> to reckon with. Sidama is the second most important contributor of the country’s most important export item, coffee and it also has a viable economy but left largely mismanaged. However, the people in the area suffered from lack of economic progress, infrastructural development, and massive unemployment today, not to mention

<sup>185</sup> See Wolassa (2016), *The Sidama Nation*, ibid, pp. 426-427.

<sup>186</sup> Wolassa, ibod p. 426.

<sup>187</sup> Seyou Hameso (2006), *The Sidama Nation: An Introduction*, ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Aadland, Oyvind (2002), *Seera: Traditionalism or Living Democratic Values?* In Bahru Zewde and Siegfried Pausewang (eds), *Ethiopia: The Challenge of Democracy from Below*, Uppsala.

<sup>189</sup> Interview with development expert in Sidama zone (March 2013, Hawassa)

prevalence of governance malpractices. This is indeed an inherited injustice and asymmetry from the past political tradition of the country. As one writer, citing Sidama intellectual stated:

Sidamas feel increasingly marginalized and do not receive adequate government resources concomitant to their economic contribution from coffee production and other activities[...]. “Sidamas are angry. The lack of autonomy has been there all the time. In recent times, the expansion of Hawassa city into farmlands resulted in farmers being displaced and left vulnerable the same way as the Oromo farmers in Addis Ababa.”<sup>190</sup>

On this topic of asymmetry characterizing the federation, scholars have empirically shown that the highland regions of Ethiopia where the large majority of the population of the country live (including Tigray, Amhara and Oromia) are relatively well-off in terms of physical and social infrastructures as compared to the remaining peripheral regions, Sidama included. Almost all the peripheral regions remain insecure compounded by various problems.<sup>191</sup> Moreover, state spending decisions most often are heavily influenced by priorities set at national level in the EPRDF consecutive five-year program. In other words, officials at the state and zone levels who are generally party loyalists, structure the choices at woreda and sub-woreda levels so that they conform to centrally determined priorities.<sup>192</sup> There are also intra-regional disagreements as to how to allocate a budget. There are limits to autonomous decision making on the part of those groups who are placed at lower level of administrations whereby it is constrained by the heavy hand of the center and its representatives at the state and zonal levels, as well as capacity limits at the woreda level.<sup>193</sup> In this atmosphere in Ethiopia, budgetary allocation lacks fairness and provokes discontent. In 2007, one economist makes the following apt observation on the unfairly controversial situation in Sidama case:

“In Ethiopia, the meager central government budget subsidy to the region is allocated based on the regional criteria. While all other regions in Ethiopia are based on the ethnic demarcations, 56 ethnic groups in the south are forced to be in the ghetto of the SNNPR. Thus, while the Tigray region with the estimated population of 3.5 million gets direct central government subsidy of 500 million birr per year officially (and billions of Birr unofficially) as of 2002 the SNNPR with over 15 million people gets 800 million birr per year. Sidama with an estimated population of 5 million gets one fifth of what the Tigray region gets... This ensures continued underdevelopment, illiteracy, hunger and starvation in the southern region so that its people will continue to be at the mercy of the TPLF food handouts obtained by begging the international community. In this way, the regime ensures

<sup>190</sup> William Davison (July 20/2018), Sidama Expect Referendum on Statehood within a year after Zone Backs Autonomy Demand, *Ethiopian Observer*, (available: <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2018/07/20/sidama-expect-referendum-on-statehood-within-a-year-after-zone-backs-autonomy-demand/>).

<sup>191</sup> Asnake Kefale (2009), *Federalism and Ethnic Conflicts in Ethiopia: A Comparative Study of the Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz Regions* (PhD Diss.), University of Leiden, p. 86.

<sup>192</sup> Edmond J. Keller and Lahra Smith (2005), Obstacles to Implementing Territorial Decentralization: The First Decade of Ethiopian Federalism’ in Philip Roeder and Donald Rothchild (eds.), *Sustainable Peace: Democracy and Power Dividing Institutions After Civil Wars*, New York: Cornell University Press.

<sup>193</sup> Edmond J. Keller and Lahra Smith (2005), Obstacles, *ibid*.

that the southern peoples will not be able to resist the injustices of the alternating Abyssinian rules”.<sup>194</sup>

In this regard, horizontal asymmetry and imbalance of resource sharing have become one of the key controversial features of the Ethiopian federation today.<sup>195</sup> Asnake notes that since 1994/5, the federal government has been using a formula-based division of revenue. Accordingly, the formula is composed of three elements-regional population size, level of poverty, and revenue generation capacity. Due to different grievances, there have been so far five revisions to the subsidy formula.<sup>196</sup> In this regard, unequal fiscal decentralization is one factor of inducing grievances. In other words, grievances of unequal ethnic gains-real or imagined- in resource allocation could lead to conflicts.<sup>197</sup> As we noted above, in the Ethiopian federation, the amount of money that a given ethnic group (administrative unit) receives from the federal distribution fund depends on its location on the administrative hierarchy. Accordingly, ethnic groups with regional status receive a relatively higher amount of a federal subsidy than those with a lower level administrative hierarchy despite population size or their economic contributions.<sup>198</sup> Asnake Kefale makes the following comparative observation on discrepancy in budgetary situation in Sidama:

“...For instance, a comparison of the Harari region that has an estimated population of 185,000 and the Sidama who were given a Zonal status within the southern region with an estimated population of 2,776,928 [now well over 5 million] gives us a grossly unequal distribution of funds. The Harari region for the 2006/7 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 received a subsidy of 30, 756,000 ETB (about £2, 563,000) from the southern region. Such a variance in the allocation of resources fuels demands for a higher level of administrative unit. This partly explains the persistent demand of the Sidama of the southern region for a regional status.”<sup>199</sup>

Currently, Sidama administration with over 5 million people is allocated 3.9 million subsidy per year whereas the Afar region with 1.9 million people get subsidies in billions from the federal pocket.<sup>200</sup> The reason is simple: administrative hierarchy is a single most decisive factor in budget allocation in Ethiopia. This shows well the fiscal side of the injustice which strengthens the claims of the Sidama. As noted elsewhere, Sidama nation produces the second largest export coffee next to Oromia and it is therefore a major contributor to national economy,<sup>201</sup> but it benefits by far a less meager amount from a central subsidy scheme, and even that through the intermediary of the unhealthy SEPDM. The Sidama people deserve a proportional fiscal allocation from the central

<sup>194</sup> Wolassa L. Kumo (2007), *Why Do Sidamas Reject the SNNPR?*

<sup>195</sup> Paulos Milkias (2007) as cited in Asnake (2009), *Federalism and Ethnic Conflicts*, *ibid*.

<sup>196</sup> Asnake Kefale (2009), *ibid*, p. 89.

<sup>197</sup> Asnake (2009), *ibid*; For a comprehensive contribution on federalism fiscal issues, see Solomon Nigusie (2008), *Fiscal Federalism in the Ethiopian Ethnic-based Federal System*, Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers.

<sup>198</sup> Solomon Nigusie as cited in Asnake, *ibid* at p. 90; See Wolassa (2016).

<sup>199</sup> Asnake Kefale (2009), *Federalism and Ethnic Conflicts in Ethiopia*, *ibid* pp. 90-91.

<sup>200</sup> Wolassa L. Kumo (20 Dec. 2019), Paper presented about economic condition youth employment in Sidama, Bansa, Sidama].

<sup>201</sup> In the past 17 years, Sidama coffee import brought in billion Birr, but Sidama gained back 3.5 billion. (Dr Wolassa presentation at Hawassa, 15/12/2018. Hawassa). For details on coffee economics and grievances in Sidama, see Wolassa (2016). Pp. 367-374.



government to develop the region which remained impoverished for long, and the Sidama people have for the first time failed to ensure food security.<sup>202</sup>

The issue of fair and proportional representation in the political institutions of regional and federal governments have also become other bone of contention. As Beza Desalegn observes, while the ethnic federalism encourages equitable political participation based on ethnic identity, there has not been fair representation for ethnic groups, and the ‘favored ethnic groups’ who constitute ethnic minorities are made ‘political majority’.<sup>203</sup> This gives them easy access to higher official and access to scarce resources. In Sidama, there is a widely held belief that they are not proportionally represented in the different government organs of both tiers of government. As experience shows, it is very common to find only one or two ethnic Sidamas in federal ministerial position while some ethnic groups who constitute lesser population are entitled to higher representation. The political rumor heard surrounding the politics of population size of Sidama nation has some roles but it is mainly result of political motive of disempowerment.<sup>204</sup> As it has been elaborated elsewhere, the Sidama elites tend to believe that the government deliberately reproduce a less population figure which is unacceptable to both elites and wider public who accuse the population data as forged and inherently deficient.<sup>205</sup> Its is designed to succumb to the sensitive political realities motivated by politics of selective disempowerment. Though it is not sole factor, such controversy has a bearing on the budget allocation, budget subsidy and adequate representation in the institutions.”<sup>206</sup>

The points raised under this section are not exhaustive. Further reasons could have been made elsewhere but these points are the critical ones capable of at least bringing to the attention the grievances of Sidama public. As can be seen, the Sidama grievance and strengthened call for regional self-determination is not fundamentally related to ‘ethnic-hatred’ towards other peoples who lived with them.<sup>207</sup> The essence of their is that these points are founded on basic principles of equitable governance, resistance against domination, accountability, and fair resource distribution and fair treatment of all citizens before the law.<sup>208</sup> However, in Sidama today, any person who voices these concerns is rounded up and thrown in to the various prisons throughout the 19 districts with impunity.

### **The Formal Demand for Sidama Regional Statehood and Its Aftermath**

The change of the regime in post-1991 Ethiopia, which ended a century-old Amhara elite’s domination, has created a new power relation, which facilitated the hegemony of Tigrayan elites

<sup>202</sup> Hawassa Teessonke (17 Nov. 2012), The EPRDF Cadre in south Ethiopia Continue to Commit Crimes against Humanity in Sidama: Cry the Beloved Country (available: <https://hawassasidama.wordpress.com/2012/11/17/the-eprdf-cadres-in-south-ethiopia-continue-to-commit-crimes-against-humanity-in-sidama-cry-the-beloved-country/>).

<sup>203</sup> Beza Desalegn (2018), Challenges of Ethnic Representation in Ethiopia and the Need for Reform, *Mizan Law Review*, Vol. 12, No. 1, (pp. 1-28), p. 1.

<sup>204</sup> Interview with a member of regional council from Sidama (March 2013, Hawassa).

<sup>205</sup> See Seyoum Hameso (1998), A Coalition of Colonized Peoples: A Sidama Perspective, *Journal of Oromo Studies* Vol. 5, Nos. 1 & 2, (pp. 105-133), p. 106.

<sup>206</sup> As one Sidama political elite underscored: “For instance, the major five ethnic groups that account for about 52 percent of the regional population control only 30 percent of the seats in the regional council, while 44 minority ethnic groups that account for about 20 percent of the regional population control 40 percent of the seats in the council.” quoted in Berhanu Gutema, *ibid*, p. 195.

<sup>207</sup> Kifle Wansamo (2009), *Towards Building Stability*, *ibid*, p. 350.

<sup>208</sup> Hawassa Teessonke (2012), *ibid*.

while frustrating the rest of the Ethiopian elites.<sup>209</sup> The minimum demands of fair share of political power and resources within the Ethiopian state has not been met, and for some, the right to self-determination is only a public relations exercise.<sup>210</sup> This fact thus, forces the hitherto marginalized people to redefine their approaches and struggle to ‘improve’ their political status and benefits. The Sidamas are now represented in the regional and federal governments by the SEPDM whose relationship with Sidama remained largely hostile. The veteran opposition-SLM-is said to be active as an opposition group operating in the sphere of protest, also rallies for Sidama right to regional self-determination, and it struggles against politically motivated arrests of Sidamas.<sup>211</sup> The SLM leadership is silenced and Sidama officials who are suspects of voicing people’s grievances are attacked for their alleged relation with the former. The Sidamas’ demand for equitable share of resources and formation of autonomous statehood has been easily frustrated by a EPRDF’s dominant power players along with southern elites who have followed a dual strategy, co-optation of some groups and exclusion of other more demanding ones.

Specifically to the Sidamas, the years following 2000s can be characterized as a regime’s deliberate crumbling of any visible development projects that helped to lift up Sidama people out of acute poverty.<sup>212</sup> The alternative local development initiatives that were supported by donors ‘were shut down by the current government with impunity due to pure jealousy and inimical attitude to economic advancement of Sidama people’.<sup>213</sup> And since SPDO, then a puppet erected as representative party of Sidama, was later demolished and merged with the SEPDM, the Sidama people continued to suffer in an unprecedented scale. This is worsened by bad governance systems and growing political trauma following *Looqqe* massacre.<sup>214</sup> During these periods, the Sidamas claim to have faced trauma and were relegated to second class citizens in their hometown.<sup>215</sup> As a logical flow events, both the political elites and the Sidama public began to critically revitalize that there should be some options to alleviate the rampant political abuse and socio-economic problems. The readily-made solution points towards revitalizing Sidama identity and correcting its improper placement in the contemporary political and administrative structure.<sup>216</sup> In conjunction with other contemporary issues, this gives rise to taking the formal demand for the formation of the autonomous Sidama regional state as a option for Sidama to escape bad political situation and the concomitant societal problems. On top of those understandings, the ruling EPRDF coalition lost most of its national parliament seats to opposition, a veteran SLM included, in 2005 national election.<sup>217</sup> This event frustrated the EPRDF rulers in the region and the leadership gave green light and changed the speed of the proceeding for regional claim. The zonal party leaders also

<sup>209</sup> Merera Gudina (2003), *Ethiopia*, ibid, p. 173.

<sup>210</sup> Harbeson, J (1998), Is Ethiopia Democratic: A Bureaucratic Authoritarian Regime, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 9. No. 4. 62-69.

<sup>211</sup> Lovise Aalen (2011), *The Politics of Ethnicity*, ibid, p. 111.

<sup>212</sup> Interview with ex-economic development expert in Sidama zone, (March 2013, Hawassa); See also Markos et al (2011).

<sup>213</sup> Hawassa Teessonke (2012), ibid.

<sup>214</sup> On top of that, immediately after Looqqe Massacre, then regional rulers banned Fichee-Sidamas’ famous new year event not to be celebrated in Hawassa and its environs. The ban-which is premised on the allegation that the Sidamas used the opportunity and ‘insulted’ the regional officials through qeexaala- continued up to 2005 parliamentary election which shocked the survival of the regime itself.

<sup>215</sup> Interview, Cultural elder from Sidama, Haweela clan (March 2013, Hawassa).

<sup>216</sup> See Markos Tekle, Zinash Tsegaye, et al (2011). *A History and Culture of Sidama Nation*, p. 135.

<sup>217</sup> For more on 2005 national election and ensuing crisis, see Abbink, J (2006), Discomfiture of Democracy?: The 2005 Election Crisis in Ethiopia and its Aftermath, *African Affairs* 105, 419, pp. 173-199; See also Tronvoll, K and Tobias Hagmann (2012) (eds.), *Contested Power: Traditional Authorities and Multi-party Elections in Ethiopia*, Leiden; Brill.

enthusiastically engaged in the process and actively supported it.<sup>218</sup> Following the series of public deliberations throughout different parts of Sidama, the then Sidama Zonal Council convened “2<sup>nd</sup> round 9<sup>th</sup> regular session” as it is commonly called, on 14-17<sup>th</sup> July 2005/1998 E.C to deliberate on the popular demands for the regional matter. As such, for ensuring the establishment of regional state for state, the zonal zonal council culminated this by the official endorsement by the unanimous vote for statehood.

### **Compliance with the Constitutional Procedure: How was the Demand Initiated and Voted?**

As can be seen from the Minutes of the Council, the council for devotedly revisited the past and present situations of Sidama from the perspectives of contemporary Ethiopian political dynamics. As the council’s minutes that details the petitions and council’s proceedings<sup>219</sup> shows, the council reiterated that the Sidama people, being one of the ancient people, but subjected to successive exploitative systems, also made a solid struggle to preserve its autonomous existence and self-rule, and attain the right to autonomy to administer its own affairs. The process was in line with the 1995 FDRE constitution, which marked supposedly the beginning of new chapter in the history of the country and promised to address the century-old problems of the nations and peoples in the country. It was noted that the council seriously considered that the Sidama people have plenty of justifications for enjoying local autonomy. These range from large populations size beyond accommodation by zonal capacity; its unique cultures, rich traditions and ways of life; experience in bureaucratic administration capacity to lead itself; homogeneous and cohesive national groups with strong socio-cultural norms embodied in century-old cultural values, and above all enormous economic potential. The agenda have been comprehensively considered by Sidama people through mass deliberations conducted in local level administrations, woreda level consultations and at towns and zonal council level.<sup>220</sup> Constitutionally speaking, it is only the zonal council which has mandate to run the process. The approach followed in Sidama case to undertake mass consultations from below is only meant to substantiate and reflect the mass support base and ensure wider public participation in the process. As one activist pointed out, this process is also a sufficient evidence to counter the arguments of antagonistic camp who tend to consider the Sidama cause as all the work of political elites which has no popular base.

At this historic moment, session of the council was remembered for its diversity of participants and unity of causes and ideals. The participants ranged from those representatives from both houses of the federal government, ministers, academic communities, regional officials and Sidama country elders.<sup>221</sup> At this juncture, it is important to quote one participant, Habte Fichola, representative at HPR, who is reported to have said:

Even though the past successive Ethiopian rulers and their *Gabbar-Neftegna* system alienated Sidama people of their dignity and have subjected them to endless exploitation, the Sidama nation has heroically conserved its name. Its name represented partly the whole

<sup>218</sup> Lovise Aalen (2011).

<sup>219</sup> See “Sidama peoples’ Demand for the Regional Status through Woreda and Zonal councils”, July 2005, Hawassa (in Amharic).

<sup>220</sup> Some critics questioned the procedural importance of undertaking consultations and petitions at Kebele and Woreda levels. For this writer, however, the petitions from below does not infringe the constitutional procedures. In Ethiopian political life, decisions are practically imposed from above through top-down approach which narrows down opportunity for public consultation.

<sup>221</sup> Interview with the then Sidama zonal council member (Feb. 2013, Hawassa).

of Southern area ... then as ‘Sidamo’ *Teklay Guezat*, and lately during Derg as ‘Sidamo’ *Kifle-Hager* [...] This was the result of the heroic struggle and resistance against assimilation. The position of this heroic people and their political status were deceptively downgraded to the worst level of suppression of its true name in the political discourse and replaced with the derogatory name ‘South’. Ultimately, this transgression resulted in the dismantling of their name and dignity. Therefore, as we convene, this mischief should be remedied in our determined measures according to the constitution and that the true Sidama name of which the people are known nationally and internationally should be restored....” (*Translation mine, emphasis added*).<sup>222</sup>

This above quoted paragraph preeminently expresses the Sidama peoples’ general viewpoint of conception of the past histories and the present experiences with the Ethiopian state. The same notion was reflected by the participants from district to federal government officials. The then vice southern regional president, Meles Marimo<sup>223</sup> and other participants also stressed that the current Sidama peoples’ new quest for regional autonomy is as old as the EPRDF regime itself when the regime enforcedly dismantled Sidama autonomy. They also promised to make concerted efforts, farsighted leadership and a stronger cooperation of officials and Sidama public from the all walks of lives.<sup>224</sup> The members of the council showed their commitment to supposedly amend the political abuses and frustrations prevalent on Sidama.<sup>225</sup> The zonal council and regional leaders came to the full accord that the realization of Sidama regional state symbolizes the resurrection of those perished and massacred in the history of Sidamas longer struggle against oppressive systems. As can be read from the council’s proceedings, the zonal council deliberated up on the quest of regional statehood in the above spirit and came to declare the need to make a joint action to ensure the fulfillment of popular quest on the basis of constitutionally mandated procedures<sup>226</sup> The justifications the zonal council mentioned included: large population size; distinct and unique socio-cultural ways of life; sound and viable economic life; its identifiable territory; single intelligible language and their own unique tradition and culture, and various celebrated values, norms and practices. To this, they also add that the Sidama population figure is higher than [5] million and better organized national group which is beyond satisfying its socio-economic demands under administration at zonal status. With these arguments, they object to being relegated to the status of zonal administration, a politically lower status (as distinct from ‘nation’).<sup>227</sup>

### **Unanimous Vote for the Autonomous Sidama Regional State**

As noted, the Sidama council underscored that the Sidama nation exceedingly qualifies the criteria of NNPs who are considered as the right holders in the constitution. Accordingly, the council was

<sup>222</sup> See the Document *Sidama Peoples’ Demand for Regional Status through Woreda and Zonal Councils*, July 2005, Hawassa.

<sup>223</sup> Mr Meles Marimo was then Deputy Regional President and Head of Regional Justice Bureau. There is a widely held rumor that after he received order from Hailemariam Desalegn, then regional president, they both have authorized the security atrocities committed during Looqqe massacre.

<sup>224</sup> See the document, *ibid*, p. 4.

<sup>225</sup> There was saying of the day which goes “*YeSidamana yeferes gari fashion alefe*’ roughly contextualized as: ‘Sidama power is foregone fashion, dampened in Hawassa”, which shows a deep-seated stigmatization and Sidamas’ disadvantaged position during that time, (interview with Hawassa resident Sidama elite, Feb. 2013, Hawassa).

<sup>226</sup> See the document of the council’s proceeding, *ibid*, p. 7

<sup>227</sup> See Kifle Wansamo (2007), *Towards Building Stability in Multinational/Ethnic Society*, *ibid*, p. 201.

reported to have ‘resolved to establish the “Sidama National Regional State” and endorsed the official demand for the regional statehood of the Sidama with *unanimous vote*. The participants, including cultural elders and religious leaders supported the approval in which it was reported that the ‘ululation lasted for over 30 minutes’.<sup>228</sup> In line with the procedures set out in the constitution then, the zonal council wrote a letter for SNNPR Council dated 9/11/97 E.C (2005) requesting the latter to execute the decision made by the zonal council. This letter notified the regional council/government about the unanimous decision of the zonal council thereby complying with the Art 47 (2) and (3 a) of the FDRE constitution. It officially demanded to take the appropriate measures to duly execute decision of the zonal council within the time limit provided for in the constitution.<sup>229</sup> Consequently, the regional state council accepted and took some measures to verify its legality<sup>230</sup> and its ‘the standing committee of the Legal Affairs’ responded that the Sidama had a constitutional right to ask for regional status. The same response was given by the Council of Nationalities in the region.<sup>231</sup> When these procedures are seen in light of the federal constitution, one can conclude ensure that it is in full compliance with the procedures and requirements. The constitutional procedure states that the right of nation, nationality or people to forms its own state is exercisable, inter alia, when the demand for statehood has been approved by a two-third majority of the members of the council of the NNPs concerned and the demand is presented in writing to the state council.<sup>232</sup>

Following that, the regional Council of Nationalities<sup>233</sup> published the quest of Sidama people for regional statehood separate from SNNP in its official journal. Meanwhile, the seemingly insurmountable political wind started to blow quite opposite direction. The promulgated constitutional stipulations have to be subject to surveillance for pragmatic political considerations of the ruling party who is intolerant of claims which runs against its perceived political interests. In the end, the ‘omnipresent’ EPRDF’s central party apparatus intervened contrary to the clear constitutional stipulations and hindered the course of action by instructing the puppet regional affiliate-SEPDM. Since 2005/6, the Sidama question was forcefully dampened and those who advocate for it were persecuted, terrorized by party security networks or left jobless and lived under difficult conditions.

### **The blockade by the EPRDF Central Party Apparatus: Sidama Case ‘Aborted’**

As the foregoing discussions revealed, the Sidama regional state which existed during brief transitional period was dismantled and replaced by a new pseudo-ethnic region. In light of this politically discontented background, the Sidama zonal council’s unanimous voted for regional statehood which was hoped by many as an alleviate mechanism did not to produce the anticipated results. The issue which the constitution renders the exclusive jurisdiction of the regional council in consultation with the council of nations/nationalities concerned illegitimately became a federal matter for EPRDF’s maneuvers. As it has been mentioned in this work, every legal and political

<sup>228</sup> See the Document, p. 8.

<sup>229</sup> See Art. 47 of the FDRE Constitution; see also the Zonal Council proceeding document.

<sup>230</sup> Markos Tekle et al (2011), *ibid*.

<sup>231</sup> See Lovise Aalen, 2011, p. 152.

<sup>232</sup> See Art. 47/3 (a) of the FDRE Constitution.

<sup>233</sup> The Council of Nationalities was established at the regional level in 1993 to create an institution that would help promote unity in extremely diverse SNNPR state. It is a regional equivalent to House of Federation. See Lovise Aalen, (2011), p. 101.

course of action must be in line with the political interest of the hegemonic ruling elites. The centralized party rule they installed have ended up the power in the hands of its powerful leader late Meles Zenawi. As one writer puts it, “A state structure where a party boss can prevail over the law [and the constitution] has been created.”<sup>234</sup> Therefore, the Sidama people’s move for self-rule has to be seen in light of this context.

According to the terms of the constitution, the regional council, after receiving demand from the concerned nation/nationalities (zonal) council must organize a referendum within a year which seems mandatory.<sup>235</sup> The National Electoral Board establishment proc. No. 532/2007 provides that the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia has a delegated mandate to execute the quest of referendum in the territory of the NNP that made the demand for the state formation in cooperation with the regional state council. However, no further proceeding was achieved as the terms of the constitution-which in its own terms declares that it is the supreme law of the land,<sup>236</sup> is severely curtailed by the extra-legal practices of the ruling nucleus. Subsequently, to the severe disappointment of the Sidama public, no referendum was organized. Perceiving the process as threatening to their power politics, the central authorities started to devise a mechanism to thwart their claims. According to International Crisis Group:

“...the EPRDF’s ability to influence local decisions stems from its involvement in the establishment of regional parties. The leaders of these regional organizations have built their careers on personal links with TPLF/EPRDF mentors. As such, the federal government influences regional governments through this channel, assuring broadly uniform policy, procedures and law. It enabled them to easily put in their grip popular and regional issues. The affiliated regional parties have little option other than working “hand-in-hand with EPRDF” on whose [political and] financial goodwill their region depends”.<sup>237</sup>

Furthermore, the federal government for long maintained special offices under the offices of Prime Minister<sup>238</sup> and, later there is Ministry of Federal Affairs who oversee regional issues despite the doubtful constitutionality of its jurisdiction. Regions resent for the perverse lack of autonomy in administration and interference in decision making including on their internal affairs. As the former Benishangul-Gumuzi president Yaregal Ayisheshim stated:

“...those people sent from federal government to support regions have no clear vision, no knowhow, and, rather than equipping regions’ capacity, they were inhibiting the performance of regional administrations. The interference was unconstitutional and ‘savage’ [...] We raised these concerns during *tehadiso gimgema* [renewal self-evaluation]. We can’t even utilize our own regional budget. Those intervened even abused their power, went abroad and pursue scholarship with misappropriated budget from regional administration”.<sup>239</sup>

<sup>234</sup> Aregawi Berhe, (2008), *The Political History of Tigray Peoples Liberation Front*, ibid, p. 343.

<sup>235</sup> See Art 47/3b of FDRE Constitution.

<sup>236</sup> See Art 9 of the FDRE Constitution.

<sup>237</sup> International Crisis Group (2009), *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, ibid, p. 16.

<sup>238</sup> Aalen, (2002).

<sup>239</sup> Ato Yaregal Ayisheshim, (Interview on Walta TV, 2019).

Accordingly, critical observers maintain that the domination of the federal state by the EPRDF party network along with its ambiguously conceived ‘revolutionary democracy’ “severely undermines democratic institutions and peoples’ collective rights”.<sup>240</sup> Moreover, both supporters and opponents of ethnic federalism agree on the idea that party’s democratic centralism entrenched in the state-party system and unwarranted federal interventions in the regions undermine the principle of local self-government and cripples their autonomous decision-making. As such the decentralized state system in the constitution runs like a centralized state in practice,<sup>241</sup> and state institutions and the party system are systematically intertwined. According to Tronvoll and Vaughan (2003), this builds up on long tradition of power in Ethiopia.<sup>242</sup> The Amharic term ‘*mengist*’ expresses the conflation between representatives of the local government, the political party and the state.<sup>243</sup>

In this atmosphere, prime minister Meles Zenawi intervened and the zonal and regional Sidama officials who proceeded with or supported Sidama case were put under sever political pressure. They were blamed for pursuing the agenda not priori endorsed by the central party. Besides, the regional council was also reminded not to carry on with the same.<sup>244</sup> Rather than finalizing the process with constitutional and legal mechanisms, the extra-legal/political solutions were extremely opted thus constraining the exercise of the so-called constitutional right of the people. As the time went by, he urged to hold a deceptive meeting with Sidama elders in such a way that the peoples demand could methodically be circumvented. Following, a manifestly façade meeting presided over by Meles was convened at Hawassa in Sidama cultural hall with carefully recruited participants who were mostly party cadres loyal to the center. The participants also included nominated elders who were assumed to be untrained and ‘uncritical listeners of the party boss’.<sup>245</sup> At this critical juncture, the uneducated elders who lack politically considered experiences, and weak cadres were instructed to give their ‘soft’ opinion in response to the prime minister’s suggestions to suspend the case. Contrary to their expectations, however, the available sources show that the elders and participants courageously raised the fundamental concerns of Sidama society and some even challenged his approach.<sup>246</sup>

Following bogus consultations, highly influenced by the country’s authoritarian legacies, Meles Zenawi viciously attacked the Sidama popular political leaders. The typical example is the abrupt dismissal of the Sidama administrator Geremew Garje from zonal leadership. In this controversial and maneuvering climate, the ruling party had employed systematic tactics of duplicity to thwart Sidama’s claim for autonomous statehood. On one part, they employed coercive mechanism to obstruct the request, and on the other hand, they employ a means of pseudo-public consultation meetings to mislead the public. All the way using the latter, they employed what some call it “fake concessions” to the Sidamas. Accordingly, those Sidamas who have changed their stance thereby collaborated with the party’s reversal decision were rewarded to the higher positions. Appointing

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<sup>240</sup> See for example Hagmann and Abbink (2011), Aalen (2006; 2011), Abbink (2009;2012).

<sup>241</sup> Lovise Aalen (2006), Ethnic Federalism and self-determination for nationalities in a semi-authoritarian state, *ibid*.

<sup>242</sup> Vaughan and Tronvulli, (2003), *The Culture of Power in Contemporary Ethiopia*, *ibid*.

<sup>243</sup> Tronvoll, (2008); Aalen, (2011).

<sup>244</sup> Interview with Sidama member of regional council, (March 2013, Hawassa).

<sup>245</sup> Lovise Aalen, (2011), *The Politics of Ethnicity*, *ibid*, p. 153.

<sup>246</sup> Lovise Aalen, (2011), p. 151.

next regional president, Shiferaw Shigute from Sidama in 2006, who was later to emerge as unchallenged regional personality vis-a-vis Sidamas' claim (in his effort to satisfy his party boss's interests) is seen by many also as the part of this process<sup>247</sup>. Indeed, many murky promises were made during illusory talks with the late prime minister. Meles Zenawi even went to the extent of saying 'Sidama can be independent nation let alone regional state',<sup>248</sup> but insisted on Sidama elders to holdback their quest since they are, according to him, 'serving as the guardian of the weaker fragmented south'. Back in 1971, Murray Edelman wrote about how the subjective effects of power functions in this kind of situation when he wrote: "political actions chiefly arouse or satisfy people not by granting or withholding their stable, substantive demands but rather by changing their demands and expectations."<sup>249</sup> Nonetheless, critical Sidama intellectuals stated that this TPLF/EPRDF's promises and reward tactics may satisfy the short-sighted interests of the political elites. But it 'has never convinced the majority of the Sidama elite and the people who are forced to live under enduring discontents' and who would wait for favorable time to achieve their aspirations.

This controversial pseudo-consultation has resulted in misunderstandings not only among the public but also the academics. Particularly, the outsiders were less aware of the government's use of coercive force, clandestine punitive measures and at times manifest refusal to allow for Sidama regional claim. Consequently, commentators began to forward differing interpretations as to how the Sidama case is handled and addressed. Some constitutional scholars such as Tsegaye Regassa (2004) described the Sidama situation of the time as consensual 'mutual understanding and cooperation between the zonal council and the regional state'.<sup>250</sup> On the other hand, Berhanu Gutema (2007) described the situation as 'concessions' on the part of the Sidamas and the EPRDF. However, the closer examination of the present case reveals that the Sidama case does not fall under mutual understanding and cooperation, nor does it fall within the legitimate concessions. Mutual understanding, consent and negotiation are only sensible in a country or system where democratic dialogue and consultation is a norm, but this is not the reality in our case.

As Zahoric puts it, "the ruling EPRDF has managed to completely reverse the course of democratization from the early 1990s, and Ethiopia can now be regarded as a non-democratic country with strong dictatorial features based on ethnic favoritism and privileges".<sup>251</sup> Some describe Ethiopia as 'semi-authoritarian state'.<sup>252</sup> Accordingly, popular demands were seriously

<sup>247</sup> Lovise Aalen, 2011, *The Politics of Ethnicity*, ibid, p. 153.

<sup>248</sup> In order to have the Sidamas abandon their quest, it has used different tactics ranging from the PM meeting Sidama elders and elites to explain the importance of remaining within the SNNPR to making indirect promise to give abundant economic aid (e.g. substantial development budget, building infrastructure), giving symbolic power to the Sidamas to control administration of Hawassa, appointing some Sidama members of EPRDF to significant positions in SNNPR including presidency, raising the number of rural districts of Sidama zone, changing the name of 'Debu' (South) University to Hawassa University following Sidama name, to using punitive measures (i.e illegally imprisoning and torturing, and threatening those working in public sectors with loss of their employment. For more, See Kifle Wansamo, (2007), p. 295.

<sup>249</sup> Murray Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence*, Chicago: Markham Publishing Co., 1971, p. 8.

<sup>250</sup> Tsegaye Regassa (2009), Sub-national Constitutions in Ethiopia: Towards Entrenchment of Constitutionalism at State level, *Mizan Law Review*, Vol. 3. No. 1, p. 63.

<sup>251</sup> Zahoric, Jan, (2011), Ethiopia between Constitutional Principles and Reality' In *The Scale of Globalization: Think Globally, Act Locally and Change Individually in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 374-378, Ostrava: University of Ostrava, pp. 376-377.

<sup>252</sup> Aalen (2006); See also Aalen and Tronvoldi, (2008).



hampered whereby the prime minister urged the Sidama people to suspend their demands by calling Sidama officials to Addis Ababa in the summer of 2005. Lovise Aalen, after interviewing former minister from Sidama reported that Meles made three points to the Sidama officials. First, the Sidama council had violated the internal party disciplines and procedures of the EPRDF by raising and supporting the issue before it had been discussed by the party leaders within party circles at the central level. Secondly, the Sidama would not benefit from the separate regional state for Sidama's lack of development. Thirdly, and most importantly, if the Sidama gained regional status, this would lead the remaining nationalities to ask for the same and subsequent disintegration of the entire south.<sup>253</sup>

During the July 1991 Peace Conference of the Transitional period, Meles justified the adoption of the right to self-determination by stating that "The key cause of war all over the country was the issue of nationalities. Any solution that did not address them did not address the issue of peace and war. [...] people were fighting... to administer themselves. So, without guaranteeing these rights, it was not possible to stop the war or prevent another one coming up".<sup>254</sup> But the regime he instituted after more than a decade has not made any meaningful progress as regards addressing the question of nationalities,<sup>255</sup> and critical observers already voiced that Ethiopia's relapse into authoritarianism is clearly witnessed. The political elites who in earlier days advocated for the constitutional inclusion of the right themselves regard those who claim for its realization as 'separatists' or 'narrow nationalists' which is self-contradictory perspective in contemporary Ethiopia. A certain former TPLF member-scholar succinctly puts that:

"The PM can pass any directives...through the party structures to his party members who constitute the majority in the parliament, and in accordance with democratic centralism he instituted, directives have to be enacted on. A state structure where a party boss can prevail over the law [and the constitution] has been created. The leader of the party that claimed majority of seats in the parliament eventually became the supreme arbiter of the nation's destiny, due to the party (EPRDF) that submitted power to its central committee and central committee to its politburo, and the politburo in its turn to one person who amassed all state power in its own hands...Such a power structure is the embodiment of authoritarian governance".<sup>256</sup>

As recent studies put it, the federal state, despite according nominal decentralized power to regional and local authorities, is stronger than any previous Ethiopian state and 'has developed structures of central control and top-down rule that preclude local initiative and autonomy'.<sup>257</sup> The

<sup>253</sup> Lovise Aalen (2011). Participants interviewed in March 2013 also raised that Meles viciously exploited the cultural ethos of Sidama elders who are more considerate and softly 'listening' to the rulers who approached them humbly, who also spoke to them that his tenure is under challenge following the May 2005 election crisis (Interview with participant, March 2013, Hawassa).

<sup>254</sup> Vaughan, S. (1994), *The Addis Ababa Transitional conference of July 1991*, *ibid*, p. 56.

<sup>255</sup> As Abbink observed: "Behind the visible office holders who come from the states themselves (i. e being of the 'right ethnic background') stand advisors and policy makers linked directly to the federal EPRDF offices. In this way, policy coherence, organizational unity and executive control are thought to be best guaranteed. It means that informal political channels remain very important, if not decisive". See Jon Abbink, (2008), *The Ethiopian Second Republic and the Fragile Social Contract*, *Africa Spectrum*, 44 (2), pp. 3-28 at p. 14.

<sup>256</sup> Aregawi Berhe (2008), *A Political History of the Tigray People's Liberation Front* *ibid*, p. 343.

<sup>257</sup> Abbink, J (2011), Ethnic-based Federalism and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Reassessing the Experiment after 20 years, *Journal of Eastern African studies*, 5(4), pp. 596-618, p. 596.

recent re-emergence of developmental state ideology also reinforced the authoritarian rule and state control of society and economy.<sup>258</sup> The pervasive use of law to suppress dissent and curtail rights has been common.<sup>259</sup> As Berhanu Gutema witnessed, the Sidama political elites were inept to comprehend the TPLF's tricky political game, and they failed to bring a united platform to protect their interests and therefore easily exposed to the punitive measures of the TPLF for their support of the Sidama popular cause. In this respect, in addition to the systematic central rulers' blockade of the legitimate pathway, 'the internal division' within the Sidama political elites sowed by regime and pursued by elites 'because of misunderstandings and greed for power' has also played a role in exposing them easily to the TPLF's mantle political game'.<sup>260</sup> He further notes that, the TPLF's heavy reliance on manipulations and harassment as option to solve the constitutional rights of Sidama people was "marked by an egoistic option that serves the interest of TPLF".<sup>261</sup> In order to further weaken and split potential unified challenge, the TPLF rulers also employ a tactic of what is called 'divisive alliance' among inter-ethnic groups in which they support elites from one ethnic group to stand against the other, or within the same ethnic group so that 'their unified challenge can be easily thwarted'.<sup>262</sup>

### **Opposition to the Sidama Regional Claim: The Regime and 'other' Actors**

By making objective comparison of their socio-economic capacity, experience in bureaucratic establishments and population size with some of those nations/nationalities who are already granted a status of regional state, the political analysts identify that the Sidama case reflects the deeply inbuilt injustice in the federal setup. It is an implicit embodiment of the continuation of the past alienation and which aims to maintain such previous marginalization. The Sidamas who constitute 5<sup>th</sup> most populous nation in the country has a population more than those of Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella and Harari regions combined.<sup>263</sup> With relatively viable economic resources and territorially concentrated settlement, it could have been a feasible nation to have a region of its own. On the faces of this contradiction of the empire-turned federation, researchers ask the government to provide 'a compelling explanation' as to why Sidamas were alienated of their own region while the Hararis who comprise some 200,000 population and other smaller NNP are endowed with their own state with accompanying political and economic gains.<sup>264</sup>

The Sidama zonal council, the highest politically authority as provided in the constitution, concerning the political issues of Sidama nation unanimously voted, and officially demanded for the establishment Sidama regional state. But as we noted above, the regional and federal governments as well as their party apparatuses interfered coercively to effectively curb the quest from producing desirable outcomes. In many major ways, these pitfalls have to do with the

<sup>258</sup> Vaughan, S (2015), *Federalism, Revolutionary Democracy and the Developmental State, 1991-2012*, In Prunier, G and Ficquet, E (eds.), *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi* (pp. 283-312), Hurst.

<sup>259</sup> Adem Abebe (2012), *Rule by Law in Ethiopia: Rendering Constitutional Limits on Government Power Non-sensical*, *CGHR Working Paper 1*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Centre of Governance and Human Rights.

<sup>260</sup> Berhanu Gutema Balcha (2007a), *Restructuring State and Society*, *ibid*, pp. 216 ff.

<sup>261</sup> Berhanu Gutema (2007b), *Divide and Rule: Ethnic Federalism in Benishangul-Gumuz Region of Ethiopia*, *NES-Scandinavian Chapter*, p. 3.

<sup>262</sup> Berhanu Gutema (2007b), *Divide and Rule*, *ibid*, p. 3. ff

<sup>263</sup> Yonatan Tesfaye Fissha and Biniam Memberwork (25 August 2019), 'Negotiation Must for [Sidama] Regional Question' *Reporter* (Amharic) (available: <https://www.ethiopianreporter.com/index.php/article/16559>)

<sup>264</sup> Berhanu Gutema, 2007, *ibid*.

discrepancies between the lucrative laws in the constitution and the actual implementation. The Sidama elites argue that the ruling party, the EPRDF, which erected a constitutional-political system that promised the right to self-administration completely rejected the call to exercise constitutionally mandated right of the people. Instead, the ruling party 'has waged a continuous intimidating propaganda campaign against the Sidama political elite in a bid to enforce submission and delegitimize the whole exercise by portraying them as 'narrow nationalists'.<sup>265</sup> Since that period, the status of the regional quest endorsed by the zonal council remained largely doubtful. It is only in late July 2018 that its fate became clear to the Sidama public. By this time, Dese Dalke, then SNNPR president from Sidama, made clear to the Sidama audience, in the presence of the present writer, that the case has been 'officially reconsidered,' which meant that the quest has been renounced secretly by the executive order from above while the Sidama public remained unaware of this situation. This implied that any further proceeding with the case needed a new endorsement afresh.

As this work identified, except implicit orchestration of deception and thwarting the progress, there has not been any official explanations for the suppression of Sidama's regional question founded on the auspices of the incumbent constitution. Nevertheless, the government is under the constitutional obligation to respect and respond to the perennial quest of the people. Given this deadlock, it is important to raise and understand the possible explanations why the regime opts for extra-constitutional political solutions. One important explanatory reason has been to withstand Sidama claim and keep SNNPR intact to maintain the balance of the political power where the asymmetry is its defining feature. In Ethiopia, Oromos and Amhara are the two most populous nations in the country, however, until very recently, the helm of political power is controlled by the minority Tigrayan elites who constitute only the 6 percent of the country's population. Accordingly, in order to counterbalance potential threat to the TPLF's control of political power and access to the state resources, they navigate to create and maintain capable region which could fill the reigning power imbalance subordinate to its guidance. Seen in light of the foregoing, accepting the claim of the Sidama people for equal regional autonomy was argued to produce two undesirable consequences for the ruling regime with respect to power balance. For one thing, if Sidama achieves a regional state of its own, this was arguably feared to shake the balance of political power setup at the center. Internal secession of Sidama from the southern agglomeration and southern ruling party means that EPRDF loses the most populous and obedient regional coordinating ally, and as such, the role of SNNPR and its party in counterbalancing the assault of the populous Oromo and Amhara on the central power contest would be highly diminished. Ultimately, this is the real danger for the nationalist TPLF supremacy in the country's politics.<sup>266</sup> For other thing, granting regional status for Sidama may give a connotation that it would give a positive gesture for inviting a potential power player to the central political forum.

The second and the most important reason seems that when Sidama is allowed to establish its own region, it is feared that it would endanger the entire power structure in the south by triggering other demands for self-administration in the region and also in other regions with similar claims who would see Sidama as a model. The EPRDF party infrastructure believes that the Sidama precedent'

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<sup>265</sup> Berhanu, (2007), *ibid*.

<sup>266</sup> Muluneh Ayalew and Hailemeskel B, (2005 E.C (2013), p. 84.

is the disastrous move and should be aborted or controlled at any rate. Political elites, along with some academics, suggest that fragmenting south would result in the opening of the ‘Pandora’s Box’ which sends the message that the claims would have nowhere to end. To contain these challenges, the TPLF/EPRDF has devised rather a systematic political solution-regular appointment of the southern elites to the top political positions at the federal level rather than addressing the quest of their constituency. This concurs with what scholars such as Vaughan already ascertained in 2006: that is, in its later years, the EPRDF/TPLF has successfully shifted its commitment from ideology of self-determination for nationalities to ‘political pragmatism’.<sup>267</sup>

As remarked elsewhere, in a bid to contain the popular quest, the regime approaches the quest not as that of highest call to exercise the right to self-determination, but that that of administrative grievance, which they argue most of the time is triggered by lack of development, good governance, and therefore, their demand could be solved without changes in the structure of the regions. In Sidama case, the regional politicians argue that Sidama’s demand can be addressed without granting region for them. Except a few instances, moreover, most of the southern elites oppose the Sidama claim and widely take part in the conspiracy to thwart their case. The opposition to Sidama cause comes also from actors who oppose federalism or delegitimize demands and claims brought upon its principles. The unitarist camp who consistently denounce federalism as nurturing divisive politics and ‘tribalization of Ethiopia’ sees SNNPR as ‘mini-Ethiopia’, and considers grounding its would-be state building project from southern region. Accordingly, this group, well-seated urbanites and those who rally under the banner of nation-wide political parties, consider Sidama demand to secede away from south as destructive to their long-term political goals, and in collaboration with other southern elites, they invest huge resources and assistance in providing strategies to keep Sidama elites and political forces disorganized, and lobby the federal government not to respond affirmatively to Sidama demand.

### **Reflections from the Perspectives of FDRE Constitution and the Current Situation**

As we have noted, the Ethiopian constitution is committed to safeguard the collective and individual human rights compatible with the regional and international human rights instruments which the country has ratified. At theoretical level, the constitution grants the right to self-determination up to and including secession for all ethnic groups in its fullest sense, comparable only to the former Soviet constitution. From this standpoint, the Sidama nation have a legitimate constitutional support and justification on their side to demand their own regional self-administration. However, the ruling and their federal and regional party apparatuses ‘coercively rejected their claim’ for the alleged fear that it would trigger further fragmentation of the southern peoples. Instead of addressing Sidama question based on constitutional pledges, the regime machinery have ‘used intimidation and propaganda to against the Sidama elites who go in support of people’s quest to quell the challenge thereafter’<sup>268</sup>.

In the absence of entrenchment of constitutionalism and the rule of law, it is difficult to enforce the laws declared in the constitution. Jon Abbink remarks that the federal structure is undermined and thwarted at times, by the political ideology of the ruling party, i.e. revolutionary democracy,

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<sup>267</sup> Vaughan (2006).

<sup>268</sup> See Berhanu Gutema (2007).

as the party retained all real power at the center and has ‘not sufficiently democratized’ the federal structure: the say of the regions and the zones on any policies is very limited.<sup>269</sup> Vaughan maintains that this ideology promotes the decision making from above and total subordination of all decisions to party interests which hinders objective decision making.<sup>270</sup> The provisions of the constitution founded on liberal ideals are seriously curtailed by this ambiguous ideology of revolutionary democracy.<sup>271</sup> As professor Tronvoll (2008) succinctly noted, ‘if a constitution that excels in providing human rights protection and warrants a sound and transparent system of governance is not implemented and defended in practice, its value is meager’.<sup>272</sup> The violent state actions in response to claims for collective right and subsequent human rights violations contradicts the aim of federalism as a conflict management system. Federalism was introduced with the specifically stated objective of safeguarding the rights of ethnic groups against the past authoritarian and abusive central governments. Nevertheless, Tronvoll underscores that in Ethiopia in the past years, according to the UN and other international human rights agencies, the rights of ‘nations, nationalities and peoples’ are threatened and violated on a systematic and regular basis.<sup>273</sup> As Hessebon recently observed, the dominance of party politics over constitution made the constitution to suffer from ‘lack of integrity and vitality’ and seriously questions its legitimacy.<sup>274</sup>

In this situation, the violation of human rights of those who claim their rights based on promises of ethnic federalism ‘is likely to weaken the legitimacy of the federation’s and citizens’ solidarity with the Ethiopian polity at large’.<sup>275</sup> The increased call for exercise of some form of group rights and the authoritarian response from the regime already led to violent protests since 2015, already weakened the party structures and challenged the integrity of the country. As Tronvoll noted, unresponsive regime behaviour paves the way to ‘politico-military mobilization in Ethiopia’ which ‘has a growing potential to undermine constitutionalism and peaceful and stable development in the country’.<sup>276</sup> According to Vaughan and Tronvoll, the tensions in relation to ethnic rights have emerged because the TPLF’s policy of ethnic rights incorporates two contradictory notions. The first notion follows that ‘a community can be mobilized better in its language, using its own culture, by its own people- effectively ‘from within’. The second notion is that ‘the criteria for the establishment of nations, nationalities and peoples’ are objectively and externally identifiable and verifiable by a vanguard organization independently of the views of the groups members’ effectively from above’.<sup>277</sup>

The inbuilt asymmetries and paradoxes in regional demarcation and granting and arbitrarily denying regional status for different ethnic groups have precipitated national sentiment and created continued challenges for the proper functioning of the federal system in Ethiopia.<sup>278</sup> As the present

<sup>269</sup> Jon Abbink (2011). Ethnic-based Federalism and Ethnicity in Ethiopia, *ibid*, p. 604.

<sup>270</sup> Vaughan (2011); See also Nicholas Batch (2011).

<sup>271</sup> Semahegn Gashu Abebe (2014), *Ethiopia: The Last Post-Cold War Socialist Federation*, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing.

<sup>272</sup> Kjetil Tronvoll (2008). Human Rights Violations in Federal Ethiopia, *ibid*, p. 76.

<sup>273</sup> Tronvoll, (2008), *ibid*; Berhanu Gutema, (2009), *ibid*.

<sup>274</sup> Gedion T Hessebon (2013), The Precarious Future of the Ethiopian Constitution, *Journal of African Law*, Vol. 57, Issue 2, pp. 215-233, p. 215.

<sup>275</sup> Berhanu Gutema, (2009), *Constitutionalism*, *ibid*.

<sup>276</sup> Tronvoll, (2008), Human Rights Violations in Federal Ethiopia, *ibid*, p. 78.

<sup>277</sup> Tronvoll, K and Sarah Vaughan (2003). *The Culture of Power*, *ibid*.

<sup>278</sup> Merera, 2003; Berhanu Gutema, 2007.

study demonstrated, there are numerous ethnic groups with significant population and better economic capacity that can dependably fulfill the working procedure to establish autonomous regional state. Contrary to the realities of the country, the Ethiopia's federal arrangement is characterized as a project of hegemonic ruling group at the center dominated by elites from the Tigrayan regional state, now retrenched to their home region after loss of centrality in power, who were constantly perceived as favoring their own region in terms for political power and controlling the economy.<sup>279</sup> They used to control key power positions in the federal government and directly control regions through party's principle of democratic centralism. Critics note that this is non-proportional to what they should be accredited. If the principle of ethnic federal restructuring in Ethiopia was respected.<sup>280</sup> The preamble of the 1995 FDRE constitution declares that "We the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia 'strongly committed, in full and free exercise of our right to self-determination, to live together on the basis of equality with equal rights and powers, and fully cognizant that our common destiny can best be served by rectifying historically unjust relationships". Given this background, the federal government unduly dominated by elites from a certain regional group has been counterproductive in nurturing trustworthy federation in Ethiopia.<sup>281</sup> Now the TPLF's era of domination is bygone and nobody surely knows where the country is heading.

As noted in introductory section, in a first post-TPLF political climate, the Sidama claim reached its climax, both due to weakening of the central party control apparatus, and partly due to the 'reformist' tone of the new prime minister. Different political provocations pushed the dynamic to a higher speed, and the zonal council unanimously endorsed for the second time the Sidama's official demand for statehood on 18 July 2018. Since then, the public rallied for referendum to be organized within one-year time, but as the experience of one-year shows, it turned out to be thorny journey as before. The new government also willfully chose the path of its predecessors and declined to organize referendum. In its belated televised address to national parliament, the prime minister instead presented the case as 'a threat to national security' vowing to settle it militarily. This prompted International Crisis Group and others to call for peaceful negotiations,<sup>282</sup> and despite the prior warnings, the regime took heavy security measures for the second time, 17 years after *Looqqe* incident of May 2002. This is followed by the serious human rights violations. According to some sources and Sidama political organizations, the punitive measure resulted in the death of over 100 civilians,<sup>283</sup> and continued massive wave of arrest of grassroots youth movement for reform (*Ejjeetto*) who are instrumental in coordinating and mobilization of the

<sup>279</sup> Merera Gudina (2003). *Competing Ethnic Nationalism*, ibid, pp. 174ff.

<sup>280</sup> Berhanu Gutema Balcha (2007). *Restructuring State and Society*, ibid, p. 218.

<sup>281</sup> Berhanu Gutema, 2007, ibid.

<sup>282</sup> See International Crisis Group (2019). *Time for Ethiopia to Bargain with Sidama Over Statehood*, Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°146 Nairobi /Brussels, 4 July 2019.

<sup>283</sup> The Genesis of the Genocide on Sidama People of Ethiopia following a Bid to Declare a Regional State on 18 July 2019 (available: <https://kichuu.com/the-genesis-of-the-genocide-on-sidama-people-of-ethiopia/>; See also Press Release by the Sidama National Liberation Front (SNLF) (26 July 2019), *The Ethiopian Prime Minister[...] Declares War On Sidama People For Demanding Their Constitutional Rights To A Regional Self-Governance* (available: <http://oromoliberationfront.org/english/press-release-by-the-sidama-national-liberation-front-snlf/>); BBC (22 July 2019), *Ethiopia Referendum: Dozens Killed in Sidama Clashes* (available: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49070762>);

public for referendum is intensifying. The installment of military rule through federal security force-led ‘command post’ is swiftly implemented which largely stifles civilian life currently.<sup>284</sup>

A careful observation of the speed with which this measure took place and immediate dismissal of Sidama chief administrator and Hawassa mayor also indicate that the violent orchestration was calculated political choice. Amidst the tense security situation, the heightened popular struggle continued which forced the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) to announce the date of referendum to be organized on 13 November 2019. Though this by itself means much victory for the long-endured Sidama struggle, the realization of Sidama regional state still has rollings obstacles to face, including deliberate controversy planned to induce constitutional amendment thereby paving the way tortuous political negotiation.<sup>285</sup> Moreover, many Sidama political elites openly question the impartiality of NEBE because of its illegitimate political marriage with some political forces who clearly oppose Sidama cause. This latter is already hinted when the Board attached unconstitutional preconditions to the referendum process such as requesting Southern council to make ‘special legal framework’ which protects ‘other’ ethnic groups living in Sidama, and also about the status of Hawassa city.<sup>286</sup> The new leadership is also not content with Sidama case as the things stand now. As such, by insisting on their complete rejection of the terms of the constitution, the old and new political forces betray the founding covenant, the only remaining social contract holding the federation together.

## CONCLUSION

By drawing on the analysis of the experience of Sidama nation, this paper argues that the Ethiopian law of self-determination for nationalities has not been meaningfully implemented in practice and there is a “wide gulf between the rhetoric and the reality”. As the Sidama experience shows, the strengthened call to exercise such right on many instances resulted in the massive violent state response and consequent human rights violations. Therefore, by looking at the experience of Sidama people, I argue in this study that one of the core principles of Ethiopia’s ethnic federalism that in theory provided the right to ethnic ‘self-determination up to and including secession’, never allowed real exercise of the right to establish new regional state in practice. Even if the Ethiopian constitution recognized for different ethnic groups “unlimited right to self-determination”, it is clear from the experiences of nearly three decades that ethnic regions and/or groups are allowed neither to exercise administrative autonomy nor to form their own states, let alone secession. After reviewing the promises of the 1995 constitution for the nations and nationalities, Nigussie Afesha

<sup>284</sup> Reuters (July 23, 2019), *Ethiopia Federal Forces Takeover Security in Protest-hit region* (available: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics/ethiopia-federal-forces-take-over-security-in-protest-hit-region-fana-idUSKCN1UI29Z>)

<sup>285</sup> In the same day during parliamentary address, the prime minister spoke that his government is reconsidering granting regions along ethnic lines claiming it exacerbated alleged hostilities. Further, he said that the establishment of new region requires securing the consent of other regional states. Commentators noted that when saying this, he is already triggering constitutional amendment with further complications. An exchange of idea on this point showed that while some constitutional scholars such as Yonatan Fissaha (on Reporter) imply constitutional amendment and thereby political negotiation, other constitutional law scholar, Tsegay R. Ararssa dismiss this position arguing that even if we are to think about the constitutional amendment, it is the consequence of being a region, and it should not become a precondition to obstruct the process (personal communication with author).

<sup>286</sup> Adem K Abebe (18 Sept. 2019), *What Ethiopian Can Learn from Sidama’s Thorny Statehood Journey*, Opinion, Aljazeera (available: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/ethiopians-learn-sidama-thorny-statehood-journey-190916142335708.html>).

also concludes that while there are some progresses in some respects, “[...], there are constitutional promises which are enforced reasonably and those which remain largely in theory. The promise which fall under the latter [...] are new state formation...] among others”.<sup>287</sup> Jan Erk also notes that on many respects, there is much discrepancy between the ‘day to day workings of ethnic federalism’ than promulgated in the 1995 constitution.<sup>288</sup> One of the key factors that explain the discrepancy between constitutionally recognized right to self-determination and the prevailing de facto intricacy in exercising this noble right is the hegemonic political experience of the ruling regime and its centralized party structure and rule.<sup>289</sup> This is further compounded by the authoritarian legacy and centralist tendency of the ruling regime wherein the dominant party is embodied in activities of the federal, regional and local levels, and ‘is inseparable part of the workings of Ethiopian federalism’.<sup>290</sup> As Lovise Aalen observed, there is strong party-state conflation and the boundary between party and state bureaucracy is blurred’.<sup>291</sup> In this concluding part, I also concur with Bahru Zewde who wrote that in contemporary Ethiopia, “the tension between the formal and the actual, between declaration and implementation, rhetoric and reality, remain a palpable one.”<sup>292</sup>

In this respect, I argue that the mere existence of the right and procedures in the constitution is not sufficient guarantee by itself without requisite official commitment to implementation. As shown in the foregoing, the fact that even if ethnic based federal restructuring may help to accommodate diversity and ensure greater autonomy for diverse ethnic groups, or recognize the right for new aspiring groups, its ability to address the ethnic groups’ legitimate demands hinges on other broader and related factors such as constitutionalism<sup>293</sup> and the rule of law, among other things. And, in the absence of dependable institutions entrusted to safeguard the constitutional guarantees, it requires a meaningful, dedicated and vigilant effort on the part of the people concerned, and also a renewed attention to the constitutional promises by the new leadership. The vigilant exercise by the concerned people helps not only for the realization of their legitimate aspirations, but also makes the constitution a living document and serves as impulse towards constitutionalism. Ultimately, however, the official demand and the associated tensions in Sidama need to be addressed in terms of the principles of federalism and constitution which empowers self-rule rather than relying on unfettered state violence and political conspiracy to thwart the realization of the right. As Daniel Elazar cautioned, a forceful suppression of a demand for collective right of the people is ‘inimical to the federal process and its principles, especially when the demand is raised

<sup>287</sup> Nigussie Afesha Ayitaged (2016), *The Ethiopian Constitutional Promises to the Nation and Nationalities: The Myth and the Operational Reality*, *Bahr Dar University School of Law*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (pp. 225-261), p. 260.

<sup>288</sup> Jan Erk (2017), *The Ethnopolitics of Ethnofederalism in Ethiopia*, *ibid*

<sup>289</sup> Edmond J. Keller, (2002), Merera Gudina, (2003; 2011), Kjetil Tronvoll (2010), John Markakis, (2011).

<sup>290</sup> Jan Erk (2017), *ibid*.

<sup>291</sup> Lovise Aalen (2006), *Ethnic Federalism and Self-determination for Nationalities in a Semi-authoritarian State: The Case of Ethiopia*, *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 13: 243–261, p. 251.

<sup>292</sup> Bahru Zewde (2002), Introduction, In Bahru Zewde and S. Pausewang (eds.). *Ethiopia: The Challenge of Democracy from Below*, Forum for Social Studies, Uppsala and Addis Ababa, p. iv.

<sup>293</sup> Simply stated, “The concept of constitutionalism is ...the doctrine that governments must act within the constraints of known constitution whether it is written or not”. See Morris Kwindi Mbondenyi and Tom Ojienda (2013), Introduction to and Overview of Constitutionalism and Democratic Governance in Africa, In Morris Kwindi Mbondenyi and Tom Ojienda (eds.), *Constitutionalism and Democratic Governance in Africa: Contemporary Perspectives from Sub-Saharan Africa*, Pretoria: Pretoria University Press, (pp. 3-12), p. 3.



based on pledged promises and agreed covenants'.<sup>294</sup> The appropriate response would also help the federation to remain responsive and credible to address the legitimate claims of the nations and nationalities of Ethiopia.

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<sup>294</sup> Daniel Elazar (1989) as cited in Berhanu Gutema (2007).

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