

Local Government in Ethiopia: Design Problems and Their Implications¹

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1. Introduction

There is a growing global recognition of local government as an important level of government both as institution of democratic participation and basic service delivery. It is also used for accommodating ethno-linguistic minorities in countries with ethnically diverse population. So much so that different regional and global institutions have adopted resolutions or charters calling countries to empower local government. The African Charter on the Values and Principles of Decentralisation, Local Governance and Local Development, which was adopted in 2014, recognises local governments as ‘key corner stones of any democratic governance system’.² The European Charter on Local Self-Government provides that ‘local authorities are one of the main foundations of any democratic regime’.³ The European Charter further states that citizens right for participation is ‘most directly exercised’ at local level. For this reason, the international instruments mentioned above require the recognition of local government as sphere or level of government.⁴

However, local government in Ethiopia is far from being democratic. It is rather instrument of control and oppression. This is so, among others, because of deficient institutional design. This paper begins with a brief description of local government in the political history of Ethiopia. It then discusses the constitutional status and institutional structure of local government. It finally explains how the deficient institutional structure rendered local government undemocratic.

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² Preamble.

³ Preamble.

⁴ See for instance, the Aberdeen Declaration which provides ‘local government should be recognized as a sphere of government. Legal and constitutional recognition are important to protect the fundamental principle of local democracy. Respect for this protection ensures institutional security for local democracy’. Article 2 of the European Charter on Local Self Government also provides ‘the principle of local self-government shall be recognized in domestic legislation, and where practicable in the constitution’.

2. Local Government in Ethiopian Political History

Local government institutions are as old as Ethiopia itself, if not older.⁵ Since its inception, Ethiopia has had a 'triple layer' of authorities with an Emperor at the centre, provincial governors at the meso-level and local authorities at the lowest level.⁶ Local government institutions were the closest and most important levels of government for the people since the central government had limited reach and influence on the lives of the people. The topography of the country, rugged with chains of mountains and valleys crisscrossed by numerous rivers, did not allow the central government to reach every part of the empire. The central government's reach outside its capital was further hindered by the lack of developed infrastructure, such as roads connecting different parts of the country.⁷

A centralized system of government is, thus, a recent phenomenon in the political history of the country which began in the second half of the 19th century. The limited influence of the central government over the peripheries of the country, coupled with the ethnic and cultural diversity of the people, allowed the emergence of various types of local government institutions. Local authorities constituted as such enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy from the central government albeit shouldering the responsibility of collecting taxes and tributes and maintaining law and order within their jurisdiction for and in the name of the emperor.

Starting from the 1850s, a process of territorial expansion and centralization began in Ethiopia and, as a result, a limited degree of centralization became possible in the early 20th century as the different parts of the country were connected with the capital city through roads, railways and other communication systems.⁸ The road connectivity was enhanced after the five-year occupation of Italy paving the way for even further centralization by Emperor Haile Selassie I, who regained his throne after the Italians were expelled in early 1940s.⁹ The

⁵Teshale Tibebu (1995) *The making of modern Ethiopia 1896-1974* Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press Inc.

⁶ Gebru Tareke (1991) *Ethiopia: power and protest: Peasant revolts in the twentieth century* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 36. See also Zemelak Ayele (2014) *Local Government in Ethiopia: Advancing development and accommodating ethnic minorities* Baden-Baden-Nomos Verlagsges, 88.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸ Bahru Zewde (2002).

⁹Teshale (1995) 107.

centralization process reached its 'zenith' during the *Derg*, the military regime that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie I and introduced socialism in the country.¹⁰

In fact, soon after the expulsion of the Italian occupying forces, a reform on local administration was introduced under Emperor Haile Selassie I with the aim of centralizing power in the person of the Emperor. The reform involved redrawing provincial and local boundaries and centralizing the appointment of local authorities.¹¹ Subsequently, among the first reforms the *Derg* introduced was also a reform on local authorities.¹² It established urban dwellers associations (UDA) in urban areas which were structured at *kebele* (an institution that the *Derg* created for the first time), *kefitegna* (which is composed of several *kebeles*), zone (in Addis Ababa) and city level.¹³ In the rural areas, peasant associations were established at *kebele*, *woreda* (district) and *awraja* (province) levels. These local institutions played a crucial role in the implementation of the *Derg's* rural and urban land nationalization programs. They also provided basic services and availed certain basic goods, such as food, and toiletries for the people at affordable price.¹⁴ However, they were later used to implement the *Derg's* infamous Red Terror operations and gradually turned into a very frightful apparatus of oppression and control.¹⁵ After a 17-year armed struggle, the *Derg* was finally overthrown by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in May 1991. The latter began a process of decentralization which culminated in the formation a federal system; with a federal government at the centre and states (regions) at the periphery.¹⁶

3. Local Government and its Institutional Organization

Under the Ethiopian federal dispensation, any level of government below the state level of government is considered as local government. Currently, there are two types of local government in Ethiopia: ordinary or regular local government and an ethnic local

¹⁰ Bahru Zewde (2002).

¹¹ Teshale (1995).

¹² For more on this see Cohen J & Koehn P (1980) *Ethiopian provincial and municipal government: Imperial patterns and post-revolutionary changes* East Lansing: African Studies Center Michigan State University.

¹³ Zemelak (2014).

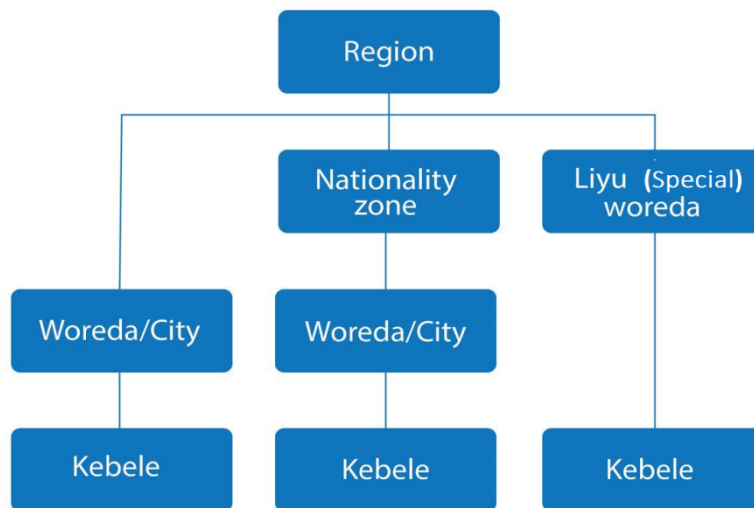
¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Art 47, Federal Democratic Republic Ethiopia Constitution (1995).

government.¹⁷ In the category of ordinary local government are *woreda* (district) and city administration. A *woreda* is established in rural areas, while a city administration is an urban local government. There are close to 900 *woredas* and a little over 100 city administrations in Ethiopia.¹⁸ Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, the two largest cities which are within the jurisdiction of the federal government, also fall within the category of city administration, despite having a special political and financial status.

Fig. 1 Organizational Structure of Local Government in Ethiopia



Source: Prepared by the author

The ethnic local government is established based on the foundational principle of the Ethiopian federal system - the right to self-determination of ethnic communities.¹⁹ Relatively large communities such as the Somali, Oromo, Tigray, Afar, Amhara and since recently the Sidama have a state which bears the name of the community. Other ethnic communities are found in minority in one of the eleven states. The Southern Ethiopia Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR) has over fifty ethnic communities, while Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz have five indigenous ethnic communities each. In the states where there are intra-state ethnic minorities, ethnic local governments have been established in the form of a *liyu woreda* (special district) or nationality zone. These local governments are established

¹⁷ For more on this see Zemelak Ayele & Yonatan Fessha 'The place and status of local government in federal states: The case of Ethiopia' 58 (4) *African Today* (2012) 89-109.

¹⁸ Ayenew Berhanu (2017) The politics of local government creation and boundary demarcation in Ethiopia's federation: challenges and implications (Unpublished PhD thesis, Centre for Federalism and Governance Studies, Addis Ababa University).

¹⁹ Art 39, Constitution.

along ethnic lines and in principle anyone of them can secede from the state within which it is found to become an autonomous state and a member of the Ethiopian federation. The Sidama state was, for instance, a nationality zone within the SNNPR before it became a state in 2020. The *kebele* is the lowest administrative unit found both in rural *woredas* and cities.

4. Problems of Institutional Design of Local Government and their Implications

The 1995 Constitution barely mentions local government. It only makes a passing reference to it. Local government is, thus, within the exclusive competence of the states. The state constitutions establish *woreda* as the principal local government. They also provide for the establishment of city administrations and municipalities in urban areas. Partly due to the non-recognition of local government in the federal constitution, local government in Ethiopia suffers from various institutional defects that have grave implications on the political autonomy and democratic relevance of local government units. In light of the preceding, aspects of problems of design and their implications are summed up hereunder.

- Local government's competencies are not clearly defined both under the federal and state constitutions;
- Local government has no clearly defined and sufficient source of internal revenue. It is almost entirely dependent on revenue transfers from the states which keeps it under the political thumb of the states;
- Local government has a compromised administrative autonomy which hindered it from recruiting and hiring skilled bureaucrats;
- Local elections are not treated as important as general elections. Six local elections have been held since the 1991 regime change and none of them were competitive;
- Opposition parties view local elections as unworthy of their effort and attention. They, thus, boycotted all the six local elections which have been held thus far;
- The seventh local election was supposed to be held in 2017, but has been postponed indefinitely without raising any constitutional or political controversy as it should.

5. Conclusion

It is almost truism that there cannot be a democratic order or an efficient system of basic service delivery without a functioning local government. It is, thus, important that any effort

to create a democratic order and system of good governance must begin with reform on local government. The first step in this direction should be elevating the constitutional status of local government by providing a constitutional principle requiring it to be a democratically constituted level of government with constitutionally protected autonomy.

About the Author



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