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Understanding administrative boundary related conflicts and their challenges in Ethiopia since 1991

Adane Kassie^{1*}, Tamirat Cheru², Tegegne Sishaw³ and Wagaw Bogale⁴

Abstract: Ethiopia is one of the ancient states in the Horn of Africa. It has a long history of statehood and uninterrupted administrative history. The objective of the study was to explore administrative boundary related conflicts and their challenges in Ethiopia since 1991. A qualitative research approach was employed to meet the objectives of the study. Primary and secondary data were collected through document analysis, key informants and in-depth interview tools. A snowball sampling technique was used to get 5 key informants in the 20 administrative centres. For the in-depth interview, purposive sampling was used to get information from chief judges, investors, elders, religious fathers, security officials, university professors, youths, women and members of opposition political parties. A total of 13 in-depth interviews were conducted in each 20 major administrative seats of the country, which were/are used as administrative seats for Governorate Generals and/or Provinces and/or Regions. The study found that since 1991 boundary related conflicts have become rampant throughout the country. Each region has experienced boundary problems against one or more neighboring regions. The existing ethno-linguistic administrative boundaries are divisive factors for the smooth implementations of the federal system, the socio-economic development, and the state building endeavors of the country. The system daunted peoples' freedom of movement across regions and become a barrier for investment and development. The situation is significantly deteriorating the socio-economic development and state

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Adane Kassie was the principal investigator (PI) of the research project and first author of this paper. Currently, he is working as a policy researcher and analyst at the Policy Studies Institute. He has been working a number of policy relevant researches. His research activities have mainly focused on peace and security, conflict resolution, diversity management, governance and federalism. Apart from this paper, the author has been working two related papers: "The Making and Remaking of Administrative Regions in Ethiopia, 1907-2018: Policy Changes and Continuities" and "The Making of Urban Boundaries in Ethiopia: The case of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, 1974-2018".

building endeavors of the country. Therefore, the existing legal and institutional gaps must be filled and resolved through national dialogue.

Subjects: Federalism; Political Institutions; Security Studies - Pol & Intl Relns

Keywords: administrative boundary; conflict; ethno-linguistic; federalism; regional state

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

Before 1991, administrative boundaries were not a serious challenge in Ethiopia. For instance, almost all 1974 Ethiopian provinces were historically, socially, and culturally peaceful and stable (Engidashet & Shiferaw, 2018). The imperial regime saw no conflicts caused by the delimitation of the administrative boundaries. Conflicts associated with boundaries were very rare and commonly caused by resource competition, such as water, grazing, and agricultural lands; thus, central government administrators of the regime left pastoralists in the area to manage their own affairs and settle disputes among and between themselves. The central government's intervention was generally limited to disarming groups active in the area (Muktar, 2022). Informants unanimously confirmed that these resource-based conflicts of the imperial period were not pervasive or protracted. Thus, they were easily solved by religious fathers and notable elders through indigenous conflict-resolution mechanisms.

The major reason for the absence of boundary-related conflicts during the Imperial regime were that administrative boundaries were not delimited based on ethno-linguistic criteria. Provinces were delimited mainly based on natural features, such as mountains and major rivers (Assefa, 2019). In fact, during the occupation period (1935–1941), the Italians designed to administer the country through “divide and rule” policy; the strategies of capitalizing on the ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences of the Ethiopian people. Although the Italian occupation in Ethiopia was short-lived and was most felt in urban centers, the period left behind an enduring impact on the administrative history of the country.

Akin to the Imperial regime, administrative boundaries were not sources of conflict during the *Derg* period. Conflicts were rare and were caused mainly by an interest in controlling and using natural resources. The *Derg* used administrative efficiency, the special nature of border areas, development, geography, history, population number, and nationality as major criteria for making administrative regions and boundary delimitations. Although “nationality” was included as a criterion, it was not employed as the sole criterion for boundary delimitations. In sum, all respondents unanimously confirmed that the non-ethnic nature of the boundary delimitation criteria significantly contributed to the absence of boundary-related conflicts in both the Imperial and *Derg* regimes; however, boundary-related conflicts have been protracted and pervasive between ethnic groups of the various regional states of the federation since 1991, mainly because of the promulgation of ethno-linguistic-based administrative boundaries, which brought about the intertwined nature of ethnicity and territory.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Boundary-related conflicts have been a major challenge of the federal system since 1991. Each region experienced boundary problems against one or more neighboring regions. Border skirmishes between regions grow into full-blown wars. Compared to imperial and military regimes, boundary-related conflicts are rampant during the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime and thereafter. Since administrative regions were entirely established on ethno-linguistic lines, ethnic politicians have been aggravating the problem by associating it with identity and resource issues. The worst thing is that the country has no strong institutions and legal frameworks to solve boundary problems that broke out between states. The 1995 constitution allows the concerned states in dispute to solve their problems, and when they fail to do so, the

House of Federation is entitled to resolve the problem. However, a comprehensive understanding of these mechanisms is lacking. Apart from the constitution, Proclamation No. 251/2001 gave the House of Federation the power to strive to solve boundary problems between states (Proclamation No.251/2001). These provisions show that the House of Federation is not adequately empowered to solve boundary problems. Other customary laws pertaining to boundary problems have also been ineffective.

The incumbent government of Ethiopia has already been threatened by protracted administrative boundary-related conflicts that broke out between regional states since 1991. Consequently, the government established the Boundary and Identity Issues Commission in 2019 to solve the problems. The preamble of Proclamation No.1101/2019 stated that “controversy relating administrative boundary is the source of conflicts between various Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” of Ethiopia. But, the commission has been working to identify the immediate causes of the recurrent administrative boundary problems rather than assessing policy gaps and providing a lasting solution for the problems. In fact, the commission was soon dissolved and the problems have continued unabated; thus, a rigorous study regarding the causes of administrative boundary-related conflicts, the challenges, and their implications pertaining to peaceful co-existence and development of nation, nationalities, and peoples across Ethiopia will add insights to policymakers to provide a lasting solution. It is cognizant of this rationale that the paper was designed to explore administrative boundary-related conflicts and their challenges in Ethiopia since 1991, and to design and forward lasting solutions for these protracted challenges.

1.3. Objectives of the study

1.3.1. General objective

The general objective of this study is to explore administrative boundary-related conflicts and their challenges in Ethiopia since 1991.

1.3.2. Specific objectives

The study has the following specific objectives.

- Point out the major causes of administrative boundary related conflicts in Ethiopia since 1991.
- Assess administrative boundary-related conflicts between different ethnic communities of regional states and their challenges to the smooth coexistence of Ethiopian nationalities.
- Explore the impacts of administrative boundary-related conflicts on the state-building process, federal structure, and development of the country.
- Develop inclusive principles for administrative policymakers in which long-lasting administrative boundary-related conflicts will be solved in Ethiopia.

1.4. Theory (Hypothesis) of the study

The EPRDF promulgation of a federation on an ethno-linguistic line is for the ambition that such rearrangement will make possible ethnic groups sharing common characteristics in a collective manner to become beneficiaries of exercising self-administration. The motives behind adopting ethnic federalism were for the assumption that it would serve as a means to mitigate ethnic tensions and conflicts by addressing the historical “national questions” and other injustices. Thus, the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) led-EPRDF political elites and architects of the 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution asserted that ethnic federalism was the only way of democratic means of structuring the country, enhancing the political participation of Ethiopian peoples, and giving ethno-regional rights to nationalities. Thus, in the EPRDF’s view, ethnic federalism was a response to the legacy of ethnic injustices in the history of pre-1991 state politics. Therefore, the adoption of ethnic federalism was considered a means of achieving ethnic demands for equitable political representation, equitable access to resources, and greater local political autonomy (Aalen, 2006; Abbink, 2011). However, the EPRDF’s motives are highly constrained by ethnic politicization and narrow ethnic nationalism, mainly because of the intertwined

nature of ethnic groups and territory on the one hand, and the existence of a high tendency of ethnicity as an instrumental vehicle for group mobilization to maintain self-determination rights and access to the state's financial resources by ethnic entrepreneurs. Thus, administrative boundary conflicts have been protracted and pervasive between the ethnic groups of various regional states since 1991. Above all, the absence of adequate public participation and consent in the process of boundary delimitation and the existence of ethnic entrepreneurs have exacerbated this problem. Thus, the system prohibited people's freedom of movement across regions and became a barrier to investment and development. Consequently, the horizontal relationship between regions and the vertical relationship between regions and the federal government are negatively deteriorated, which in turn affects the smooth functioning of the federation, as well as the socio-economic developments and state-building process of the country.

2. Literature review

2.1. Criteria for administrative boundary creation and recreations

Political geographers, among others, have searched for the "ideal" criteria for boundary definition in the hope of reducing international and internal tensions created by boundary disputes. However, administrative boundary is one of the parts of the state system; one is not only concerned with criteria for its establishment, but also with the effect the use of these criteria will have, that is, its function. Administrative state boundaries in the federal or other systems of modern governance fall into three principal typologies: historic (cultural), physical, and cartographic. However, some of the proposed criteria at the international and national levels applied to boundary creation and recreation are physical features, cultural history (ethnic identity, language, and religion), and cartography (Glassner, 1993).

2.2. Theoretical and conceptual understandings of conflict

Conflict is an old phenomenon and an inescapable human experience (Ropers, 2003). It is a scenario of the relationship between two or more parties in which each party perceives others' goals, values, interests, or behaviors as an antithesis to its advantage. Galtung (2013) noted that conflict involves contradictions, attitudes, and behaviors, and the roots of conflict are incongruities and paradoxes. Similarly, Fisher (1990) asserted conflicts as an inevitable fact of human existence, which can be defined as the incompatibility of goals or values between two or more parties in a relationship, combined with attempts to control each other and hostile feelings towards each other. Therefore, conflict is something natural and common to all relationships and cultures. It always exists, and is an inherent part of social life.

Many scholars have identified various causes of conflicts. Mayer (2000) generalized that conflict arises from basic human instincts, from the competition for resources and power, from the structure of society and the institutions people create, and from the inevitable struggle between classes. Accordingly, the author has identified five sources of conflict. These are people's communication, values, emotions, the structure of society, and history. Likewise, Jeong (2008) identified value differences, power disparities, misperceptions, and miscommunications as major sources of conflict. Daniel Katz, cited in Fisher (1997), also identified economic, value, and power differences as basic sources of conflict.

2.3. Theoretical approaches to the causes of conflict

2.3.1. Basic human needs theory

According to Cunningham (2001), basic human needs theory considers human needs that they try to fulfill under all circumstances as causes of conflict. These include identity, security, recognition, development, and basic physiological and physical needs. According to this theory, the source of many conflicts comes from frustration and prevention of basic needs satisfaction. If humans are prevented from satisfying their needs due to the perception of incompatible goals, they would fight to eliminate frustration in order to satisfy their needs (*Ibid*). Huffman (2009) asserted that human

needs are a central point of conflict. Failure to meet identity needs leads to struggle, and people go to great lengths to satisfy their interests or ego.

2.3.2. *Enemy system theory*

According to this theory, human needs divide people into out groups (enemies) and in-groups (allies). Identity is a basic human need that will be pursued regardless of the cost. Through the process of socialization, self and group identities are associated. Ethnic identity represents ties that provide a sense of belongingness, security, and meaning. In this regard, Cunningham (2001) explained the enemy system theory by asserting that “the perpetuation of aggression is insured by the victimization of one group up on another”. These reciprocal hostile actions stimulate and enlarge the opponent’s historical enmity and validate each other’s dehumanization. Victimization is the process that leads to the final behavioral action of a cycle. In general, ethnic groups’ attachment to territory, identity, and sense of loss are directly related to the enemy system theory of conflicts.

2.3.3. *Territoriality thesis theory*

According to this theory, humans are naturally territorial. Territory is connected with our sense of “self” and “group” identities. More importantly, territory and ethnic identity are strongly linked to each other. Because of the importance of territory to identity, frustration with identity makes us very concerned and likely to respond to threats of violence (Cunningham, 2001). In his own words, Vasquez (1995) states that, “... one of the major factors that separates territorial disputes that give rise to recurrent war and those that do not is the presence of ethno-national links in the disputed territory with one or both of the contending sides.” In general, all of the above theories are vital to understanding and analyzing the post-1991 administrative boundary-related conflicts in Ethiopia.

2.4. *Conflicts over administrative boundary in Ethiopia*

Administrative boundaries in the country, ruled by the emperor and nobles, were not based on ethnicity. The emperor and nobles established marriage alliance for their ruling strategy without ethnic boundaries, which helped the society to focus on national cohesion, power expansion, and class struggles (Engidashet & Shiferaw, 2018). Ethiopians had no history of inter-tribal fierceness caused by boundary related problems, they never strained for separation along ethnic lines whenever administrative boundary related conflicts broke out, and there was no mention of an ethnic or tribal issue within constitutional matters (the 1931 constitution), including its subsequent amendments. Regarding the absence of serious boundary related conflicts between ethnic groups during the Imperial and *Derg* regimes, one respondent from Jijiga Town has noted that:

... The power of the government was highly centralized during the Imperial and *Derg* regimes. As a result, the administrative regions and peoples hadn’t the right to claim borders. That was the reason for the absence of conflict in the boundary areas during the Imperial and *Derg* regimes. In fact, the Afar and Somali pastoralists of the region had been fighting over the grazing land and water during these regimes. In addition, the Oromo and Somali pastoralist had been fighting in the water at Dakketa around Babile during the earlier times. The Dakketa conflict was settled through the arbitration of the religious father and local elders. The conflict was over grazing land and water between the pastoral communities. It had also been settled through the intervention of religious leaders and elders. Generally, administrative boundary was not the source of conflict during the *Derg* regime. The conflict was between the pastoral communities of the region for grazing land and water and settled through indigenous conflict management systems of the society.

One key informant who is a member of *Ye Tintawit Ethiopia Arbegnoch Mahiber* (Ethiopian Patriots Association) in Addis Ababa also asserted that:

... Let alone an intense conflict to break out over internal boundaries, there was no conflict when the king handover some territories from one Governorate General to another. In other words, the people and their territory altogether began to be ruled by another Governorate General. This shows that throughout the imperial regime, internal boundary was not a big issue. Even for drought or rainy seasons, some group of people from the affected district used to be assigned to another productive district. It was not about gathering wealth as we see today. Internal administration was made at that time mainly for the convenience of public administration. Since the EPRDF, however, when land is associated with ethnic groups and related to wealth creation, boundaries become a cause for protracted conflicts.

Historically, Ethiopia has had regional demands for political and economic redress. But, those demands were never framed in “ethnic” or “nationalist” terms to resolve inter-ethnic conflicts (Assefa, 2019). However, the EPRDF made ethnicity the monogram issue in its flawed constitution, overstating its significance to “correcting historically unjust relationships” (The 1995 Constitution). Essentially, the TPLF brought ethnicity as a primary agenda in its 1995 constitution just for a “divide-and-rule” political strategy, which enabled it to legitimize its power and sustain its political legacy. In a *kilil* (region) administrative structure (as in the case of the Race-based divisions between Eurostans and Bantustans of the Apartheid regime of South Africa, or between commercial lands and communal lands in the vanquished racist Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in Rhodesia), the individual in *kilil* administrative system is subject to what is called “decentralized despotism” and would be subject to “dual citizenship” dilemmas. This implies that under the EPRDF ethnic-based administration, *kilil*’s residents of Ethiopian citizenship are diminished by the supremacy of the tribal strongman, of which the residents become a subject. This reveals that with the supremacy of the so called “group rights” vested in *kilils*, the individual is never become a free citizen (*Ibid*).

Broadly speaking, as far as administrative boundary related conflicts are concerned, most scholars argue that almost all the 1974 Ethiopian provinces were historically and culturally peaceful and stable, and were mostly divided by major river valleys. The post-1995 *kilil* boundaries, which are imposed in the demographic background of mixed identity, are an attempt to separate the brown *teff* from the white *teff* in a pile of *sergeegna*, which in turn exacerbates a conflict by firing a fuel and creating an unstable regime. Thus, *kilils* are imperfectly perceived and hazardously unstable. That is why, nowadays, protracted ethnic violence is rampant in the country. The EPRDF’s delimitation of ethnic territories based on identity (i.e., using language), and a political system engraved based on ethnicity opens a way for ethnic politicians to breed grounds for power and ethnocentric motives in the name of their respective ethnic communities (Engidashet & Shiferaw, 2018). In general, unlike the Imperial and *Derg* regimes, the EPRDF’s ethnic federalism has exacerbated and devolved conflicts at regional and local levels (Aalen, 2006).

The 1995 Constitution assumes that ethno-linguistic groups are homogeneous and occupy clearly delimited territories, which are highly paradoxical with actual reality on the ground. Because of historical factors such as settlement and resettlement policies of the governments and other historical factors, the population is heterogeneous, which is contrary to the constitutional assumption of creating neatly homogeneous ethno-linguistic territories. Although groups relate to distinct locations, their settlement patterns are often complex. In this regard, for instance, pastoralists have different relations to territories in semi-arid lowlands than farmers. In addition, labor migration and mixed parenthood are old practices that defy simplistic delineation between ethnicity, language, and territory (Assefa, 2012).

However, as in the case of pastoral communities, for example, before the creation of ethnic-based administrative regions, they freely move their cattle from place to place in search of grazing land and water without boundaries. However, once regions were erected on ethnic lines, the relationship between formerly friendship ethnic communities began to deteriorate, which turned into conflicts and rose to violence mainly due to competition between such ethnic communities to expand and control land and territories. For examples, including competing

claims over the town of Babile between Oromia and Somali Regional States, tensions over access to resources between Borena and Gari, tensions between Afar and Issa, conflicts between Gedeo of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional States (SNNPRS) and Guji of Oromia, and between the different ethnic communities of the SNNPRS (*Ibid*). Likewise, in many instances, relations between pastoral communities and agricultural groups deteriorated, mainly due to territorial delimitation along ethnic lines. It is particularly painful for groups that had historically changing identities such as Oromo-Somali pastoralists of the Garri, Gabra and Guji areas. In these areas, resource-sharing agreements with neighboring pastoral groups became increasingly difficult because ethno-linguistic-based territorial control is a precondition to claim a district. Therefore, Oromo-Somali pastoralists were forced to have either an Oromo or Somali ethnic identity or ally with the predominant ethnic group (Engidashet & Shiferaw, 2018).

Generally, the post-1991 ethnic-based administrative structure created widespread ethnic suspicion, mistrust, and conflicts across borders (Aalen, 2006). The adoption of ethnic federalism and self-determination for nationalities was done without genuine consultation with the wider sections of the Ethiopian people. As a result, several conflicts at the local level erupted over border issues and the representation of ethnic groups in local government bodies. Members of the locally educated elite have been fervent advocates of lower-level ethnic politics. In many areas of the country, political elites have renegotiated local relationships and mobilized people to fight for recognition as “nationality” or ethnic groups to take advantage of the new political order. Acting as “ethnic entrepreneurs,” they use the constitutional status of their nationalities to pursue their goals (*Ibid.*). In a nutshell, since 1991, conflict over administrative boundaries has become a precarious factor in the existence of the Ethiopian state.

3. Research design, sampling techniques and analysis

3.1. Research design

A qualitative approach was employed to meet the study objectives. Primary and secondary sources of data were collected through document analysis, key informants, and in-depth interviews. Administration-related constitutional provisions, administrative proclamations, administrative decrees, administrative regulations, and administrative directives were painstakingly consulted. Semi-structured interview questions were prepared for the key informants and in-depth interviews. The number of informants was determined based on appropriate sampling techniques representing 20 capital cities across the country that have served as administrative seats for *Teqalay Gizats* (Governorate Generals), *Kifle Hagers* (provinces), or *Kilils* (regions) during the Imperial, *Derg* and/or EPRDF regimes, respectively.

3.2. Sampling techniques and sample size

Since the study mainly used a qualitative method, a snowball sampling technique was used to obtain five key informants from the 20 administrative seats. For the in-depth interviews, purposive sampling was used to obtain information from chief judges, investors, elders, religious fathers, security officials, university professors, youth, women, and members of opposition political parties. A total of 13 in-depth interviews were conducted in each of the 20 major capitals of the country, which were used as administrative seats for Governorate Generals, provinces, and/or regions. In general, 360 participants participated in the research and supported the evidence obtained through document analysis.

3.3. Data analysis

The data collected for this study were analyzed using qualitative techniques. Data collected through key informants and in-depth interviews were transcribed and translated into English. The data collected through document analysis from archival centres, personal collection, and government offices were also checked for their authenticity and validity through internal and external criticisms and finally interpreted and analyzed thematically.

4. Results and discussions

4.1. Major causes of administrative boundary related conflicts in Ethiopia since 1991

Unlike the imperial and *Derg* regimes, boundary conflicts were rampant and pervasive during and after the EPRDF regime. The majority of respondents from 18 study centers (except Wollega and Jigjiga) unanimously argued that boundary issues were blurred with identity issues, and hence both significantly caused conflicts between and within regions, zones, *woredas*, or *kebeles*. Following the creation of identity-based regions, people who have historically lived in a state of peace, stability, respect, harmony, and tolerance are now in conflict because of boundary-related problems. Informants tend to associate the overall problem with the federal system installed by TPLF. In the same vein, Assefa asserted that the “... artificially gerrymandered *kilils* (tribal enclosures) which have since spawn dangerous border conflicts and cases of ethnic cleansing and extra-judicial killings” (Assefa, 2019). Misunderstandings and incorrect ways of implementing administrative boundaries were also some of the causes of boundary conflicts. For instance, numerous informants from Gondar, Bahir-Dar, Dessie, Debre-Markos, Semera, Jigjiga, Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, Hawassa, and Adama stated that after 1991, ethno-linguistic criteria were employed, ignoring the age-old geographical, historical, and socio-cultural parameters. However, the creation of regional boundaries has missed public consent and participation; for instance, the constitution-making process starting from its inception to ratification lacks an adequate representation system. With the combination of the above factors, the existing system has divided Ethiopian people who have lived peacefully for centuries. Moreover, politicizing ethnic boundaries by ethnic entrepreneurs (mainly by political elites), as well as the fabrication of incorrect historical narratives that blessed one and cursed the other, significantly aggravated the problem.

In general, both written documents and oral sources reveal that the TPLF incorporated ethnicity within the 1995 constitution as a political and ideological tool of “divide-and-rule” political strategy, thereby legitimizing its power and sustaining its political legacy (Assefa, 2019). In brief, because of the EPRDF’s ethnic-based administration, ethnicity and territory were intertwined so that Ethiopian citizenship at the regional and local levels is compromised by group rights, which makes the residents subjects than citizens. Contrary to the above arguments, some informants from Oromia and Somali National Regional States stated that administrative boundaries could not be a cause for conflicts. These respondents argued that arranging regional administration along ethno-linguistic lines did not cause conflicts, and that there were no problems. Such respondents try to associate the boundary problem with implementation gaps in the federal system rather than the nature of federal structure. Some other respondents, however, attributed the causes of the boundary conflict to delimitation problems. They argued that a number of administrative boundaries are delimited without the consent of the people. For instance, one respondent from Assela Town stated that:

... I don’t think that the boundary between the regional states is well delimited. For instance, the Somali claim the land from the Oromia region as far as the Awash Valley. Likewise, the Oromo claimed land from the Amhara around Minijar area, North Shewa Zone. I think this is due to lack of clear boundary delimitation. If this kind of claiming and reclaiming continue in the absence of clear-cut boundary delimitation, conflict might happen on the boundary. The major cause of the boundary related conflict is the desire to expand one’s territory beyond one’s region land.

In sum, the majority of respondents asserted that ethno-linguistic-based administrative boundaries caused rampant and protracted violence in Ethiopia. Consequently, the smooth relationship between historically harmonious ethnic communities has deteriorated. Likewise, since the federal government fails to provide immediate solutions to the boundary-related quests of ethnic communities, the vertical relationship between regions and the federal government remains antagonistic and ill-disposed.

4.2. Boundary related conflicts between regions and their challenges to the coexistence of Ethiopian nations, nationalities and peoples

Each region has experienced boundary problems against one or more neighboring regions since 1991. Border skirmishes between regions grow into full-blown wars. As a result, the situation negatively affects the vertical and horizontal relationships between regions and the federal government and between ethnic communities of regions. In the following paragraphs, this study attempts to provide some of the major boundary conflicts that have prevailed between regions since 1991.

... An informant who is an assistant professor in Addis Ababa University stated that conflicts and violence are rampant throughout the country not only due to identity issues but also administrative boundary claims. In this regard for instance, Amhara Region has had boundary related conflicts with Benishangul Gumuz Region, Oromia Region and Tigray Region. These boundaries related conflicts are not settled until today. Above all, the boundary related conflict that Amhara Region engaged with Tigray is reaching to its worst scenario. The two regions have been in a state of war since 2020. He further noted that recently, administrative boundaries become a cause of conflicts among regions due to a problem of boundary division when administrative regions were set up by EPRDF. It was delimited based on the political interest of TPLF than peoples' consent and decision. Due to boundary problem, the Amhara has been engaged in war with Tigray region and the problem is highly complicated than before. If it is not settled with peaceful means, it will be a serious threat for Ethiopian survival.

The Amhara and Tigray Regional States have claims and counter claims over the districts of Wolkite, Setit-Humera, Tsalemt, and Raya. Informants from Gondar, Bahir-Dar, Debre-Markos and Dessie stated that the conflict was caused by the armed takeover of Amhara territories by TPLF following the demise of *Derg* regime. As a result, the Wolkait Amhara Identity Question Committee was established, and state institutions were requested to recognize the Amhara identity of the indigenous people in *Wolkait, Setit-Humera, and Tsalemt*. The claimants submitted their claims to all concerned zonal, regional, and federal offices of the government, ministries, and EPRDF party bureaus on 17 December 2015 (John, 2021). In their claim, the committee stated that since their ancestors had effectively occupied all territories to the left bank of the Tekeze River until 1991, Tigrians had no moral grounds to claim any plot of land in the region. They have asserted that, historically, Wolkait had remained as part and parcel of the Amhara territory and was administered by Amhara Governors within the former Semien and Begimdir Governorate Generals and Gonder Province under Wogera *Awraja*. Culturally, they have been speaking the Amharic language, practicing the Amhara culture and showing the same psychological makeup of the Amhara people. However, because of the identity questions they raised, the committee as well as the Amhara descendants of the areas has been facing oppression, displacement, and other inhuman treatment. Despite the Amharans' repeated appeal to the federal government to handle the territories, no legal response has been provided thus far. As a result, serious boundary conflicts occurred between the two regions. The same is true for Raya.

The Issue over Metekel is another serious boundary conflict between the Amhara and Benishangul Gumuz Regional States. Both oral and written sources reveal that during the Imperial and *Derg* regimes, the administrative territories of Gojjam-Amhara, Agawmider (Awi Zone), and the present-day Metekel Zone were under one administrative unit of Gojjam Province. However, following the restructuring of boundaries along ethno-linguistic lines in 1991, Metekel was reorganized under the Benishangul Gumuz Region, which brought protracted conflicts, tensions, mistrust, and suspicions between the ethnic communities of the areas. Insecurities and instabilities, which in turn cause loss of human life, casualties, property destruction, massacre and displacement of the Amharans, and socio-economic as well as political crises, are the common facets of these areas (Admassu, 2019).

The Issue over Derra is another boundary conflict between the Amhara and Oromia Regional States. Both written and oral sources disclose that Derra was historically part and parcel of the

Amhara territory in Shewa Province. However, following the fall of *Derg*, Derra was delimited to the Oromia Region, particularly after August 1992. Consequently, the Dera Amhara Identity and Border Claimant Committee was established to claim the return of the Dera Amhara identity and territory towards its historic identity and administrative boundaries. However, the government could not provide legal responses despite repeated claims from the Amhara communities in the area. Thus, these issues have not yet been resolved. Consequently, protracted conflicts, public resentment, political tensions, and insecurities are common and pervasive facets of the area.

The boundary conflict between Boset and Fentale *Woredas* of the East Shewa Zone of the Oromia Regional State and Minjar-Shenkora *Woreda* of the North Shewa Zone of the Amhara Regional State is the other boundary conflict, while the Minjar-Shenkora *Woreda* community blames the neighboring Oromos of Bosset and Fentale for crossing their boundaries and attempting to expand and control some villages within Amora-Bet and Eddo *Kebeles*. On the other hand, the Oromos accused the Amhara communities of recurrent attacks. Lack of clear demarcation between neighboring *woredas* and *kebeles* and resource issues are major causes of recurrent conflicts in these areas. Thus, among others, specific villages such as Shilim-Gara, Awra-Godana, Nechi-Kebir, Foto Nebirand Birenti, are some of the conflict spot areas of the two regions.

The boundary conflict between the Borena-Oromo and Somali Clans is another major boundary conflict between the Oromia and Somali Regional States. Both states share Ethiopia's longest regional boundary, which extends from Moyale in the South to Mulu in the East. However, these two ethnic communities have experienced intermittent conflicts over boundaries and resources, including land and water, over the last 25 years. Informants from Adama (Nathret) Town stated that there have been protracted conflicts between the Borena-Oromo and Somali clans since 1991. For instance, at the end of 2000, numerous people lost their lives in the Somali region in a protracted conflict between the Borena Oromo and Sheikash, a small Somali clan that sought to have its own district.

The boundary conflict between Guji and Gedeo is another boundary conflict between the Oromia and Somali Regional States. A boundary clash between the Guji and Gedeo people blasted large-scale violence over the control of the Hagere-Mariam district. The ownership of Moyale Town was another source of conflict between the Somali and Oromo clans living in the area. Between 2003 and 2004, there was intense conflict over regional boundaries along the Garri (originally Darod-Somali) and Jarso (Somalized-Oromos). Although the two groups have had more than a hundred years of peaceful alliances and coexistence, their relationship was marred following ethnic-based territorial delimitations (Abbink, 2011). Disagreements over exactly where the Oromia-Somali boundary should lay have resulted in repeated referendums, but full demarcation has never been done and has contributed to ongoing strains of the area (Muktar, 2022). Owing to the conflict between Borana and Gari, more than 70,000 people fled to the border areas between Oromia and Somali. In addition, more than one million people were displaced, and thousands were killed due to border conflicts in 2017/2018 (Engidashet & Shiferaw, 2018). Renewed violence between the Borena-Oromo and Garri-Somali communities living in Moyale led to a new internal displacement in May 2018. Consequently, approximately 15,645 households and 93,870 family members were displaced by this latest incident, including more than 3,702 infant children (OCHA, 2018).

There was also boundary-related conflict between the Oromos and Sidamas. Informants from Hawasa Town indicate that a town called *Gumguma* was claimed by both the Sidamas and Oromos. Both ethnic groups have used history to claim a contested area. However, state agents could not explore this case from its roots. Consequently, conflicts persisted in the area at different times.

The boundary conflict between Issa Somalis and Afars is another boundary conflict. Historically, the conflict between the Issa Somalis and Afars has been mainly caused by natural resources such as grazing land and water of the Awash River. The water course is remarkably important for

pastoralist communities in both regions that on it during the dry season (Muktar, 2022). However, following an ethno-linguistic boundary, the cause of conflict is transformed into boundary. This is partly related to the motive for territorial expansion. Three *kebeles* namely *Adaytu Kebele* in Mille *Woreda*, *Undufo Kebele* in *Gewane Woreda*, and *Garba-Issa Kebele* (*Gedamaytu*) and *Amibara Woreda* were the main sources of conflict between the two communities (*Ibid*).

It is also common to see boundary conflicts between Benishangul Gumuz and Oromia Regional State. Boundary related conflicts erupted between Kamash and Tongo areas of Benishangul Gumuz Region and East Wollega and West Wollega Zones of Oromia Region. The respondents from Assosa and Wollega stated that the conflict was partly worsened by the absence of clearly identified boundaries. Moreover, since local peoples of neighboring regions are looking for natural resources, conflicts are exploding and finally bring far-reaching consequences such as the death of human beings, displacement, and property destruction. The other serious boundary problem was the issue of the *Mao-Komo Woreda* of the Benishangul Gumuz Regional State. According to the working constitution of the Benishangul Gumuz Regional State, *Woreda* is partly bounded by the Gambella region. By contrast, the working constitution of the Oromia Regional State indicates that Oromia is bound to Sudan. Thus, in accordance with the Oromia State Constitution, parts of *Mao-Komo* are considered parts of Oromia. As a result, around 2008/9 blood shedding conflicts occurred in these areas.

The SNNPRS also encountered recurrent boundary conflicts with the Oromia Regional State. Respondents from Hawassa and Adama stated that the major cause of boundary conflict between the two regions was the desire to expand their land over the other. The boundary conflict between the Gamo Zone and Guji Oromo over *Nechsar* National Park can be cited as an example. The recurring conflict between Guji-Oromo and Gedeo led to the eviction and death of many people. Likewise, the border conflict between the West Arsi Zone and the Sidama Zone (now the Sidama Regional State) brought numerous losses of lives, casualties, and property destruction to the border areas. The conflict over the Wondogenet district of Oromia and Wondogenet district of SNNPRS (now the Sidam Region) was resolved by a referendum. Boundary Conflicts between Gedeo Zone of the SNNPRS and Guji Zone of Oromia Regional State along *Gedeb* and *Gerba Woredas* are also the other boundary conflict spot areas of the two regions. The boundary conflicts in these areas began in 1994 and have continued until recent periods.

Within the SNNPRS, there was/are boundary-related conflicts between the various ethnic communities. Some communities with special nationality administrative zones or *woreda* aspire to expand their territory and incorporate additional neighboring localities. The conflict between *Mareqo* and *Mesqan*, *Basketo* and *Melo* could be cited as an example. There was also administrative boundary conflicts between Gamo and Wolayita over investment lands located in the border areas. A total of 54 hectares of Gamo land was offered to a Wolayita investor. This conflict was exacerbated when an investor diverted the original route of the *Hamasa* River for irrigation purposes. Oral sources also confirmed that border conflicts in the *Konso* and *Ale* areas directly or indirectly affected the security of the Gamo Zone. Boundary conflicts between the *Konso* Zone and the *Ale* Special *Woreda* were mainly caused by the agricultural lands found in the border areas. Conflicts in the *South Omo* Zone were also caused by administrative restructuring. In this zone, 16 ethnic groups were merged without consent. On the other hand, among these groups, the ethnic community called *Ari* wants to be reorganized into a separate administrative zone consisting of four *Woredas*. However, the conflict that explodes in this area mainly targets other ethnic groups.

Likewise, Gambella Regional State Higher officials and local residents have acknowledged the existence of boundary disputes between the Gambella and Oromia regions, especially in *Anfilo Woreda*. The informants stated that the causes of the conflict were the desire to control land, mining areas, and other natural resources.

There is also a boundary conflict between the *Harari* and Oromia Regional States. The *Harari* Region is surrounded by the Oromia Regional State. The surrounding *woredas* and *kebeles* of the

Harari state are inhabited by the Oromo people. Thus, there is an internal conflict between the Oromo and Harari political elites and the people. Intermittent conflict is evident in the border areas. According to the informants, the Oromia region is instigating the Harari region Oromos to split and join the East Hararghe Zone. This conflict is partly caused by the absence of a clearly delimited boundary.

Likewise, there were some boundary-related conflicts between Sidama and Oromia Regional States. Informants from Hawassa and Yirgalem stated that most of the conflicts were caused by borderlands, pastures, and water. Another cause of this problem is the absence of clear administrative boundary delimitation. The informants stated that the Sidama and Oromia Regions have no clear administrative boundary delimitation. Sidama and Wolayita have also entered border conflicts over the resourceful area of Loko-Abaya. Likewise, boundary disputes were common between the Sidama and Wolayita zones along Bilate-Abaya *Woreda* (formerly known as Humbo *Woreda*). In summary, boundary conflicts between and within regions have been widespread since 1991. The problem is also common in Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa city administrations, and even in the newly established Southwest Ethiopian People's Regional State.

4.3. The challenges of administrative boundary related conflicts on the state building process

Following the ethno-linguistic administrative regions, historic administrative regions were divided and redefined into separate borders without adequate knowledge and consent. As a result, some groups have gained access to a region's historic areas during the delimitation process. According to oral sources, the system did not agree and trust each other, negatively influencing the nation and state-building processes of the country. As a result, friendships and other types of societal relationships, such as marriage alliances, are dismantled due to the politics of ethnicity. There is no freedom of movement for people. People have no guarantee of going out of their home towns and returning. Ethnic nepotism, parochialism, and ethnocentrism are the dominant views among members of ethnic groups. While foreigners live safely, Ethiopians suffer greatly in different dimensions, mainly because of ethnic politics and administrative boundary-related conflicts. This is why protracted boundary and resource-based conflicts broke out in different regions of the federation.

One of the root problems hampering state-building projects in the country is the deficits found within federal and regional state constitutions. First, Article 46 (2) of the FDRE constitution speculates on regional states to be organized on "the basis of settlement patterns, language, identity, and consent of the people concerned". However, practically, only language becomes the sole factor in redrawing the boundary of regions by missing historical population settlement patterns, historic ethnic interactions, and mutual co-existence as factors. The objective of offering territorial autonomy to a particular ethnic group in a federal system is to exercise meaningful political autonomy while simultaneously ensuring fair representation in the national political system. However, in Ethiopia, this basic essence of federalism is diluted by political elites at the regional and local levels, as they are sometimes found to provoke conflicts between ethnic groups over boundaries and resources. The other paradoxical essence of the federal constitution against the very essence of the state-building process is the constitutional provision of secession right to nations and nationalities that directly or indirectly affects social cohesion and national unity.

4.4. The challenges of administrative boundary related conflicts on the federal structure

Federalism is a covenant between two or more groups to achieve both specific and shared objectives through its pillar notions of "self-rule" and "shared-rule". This implies that federalism emanates from democracy, democratic principles, and institutions. If there is no democracy or rule of law, federalism cannot become effective and sustainable (Anderson, 2008; Watts, 2008). The majority of respondents asserted that the current Ethiopian administrative boundaries cannot allow people freedom of movement and peaceful coexistence, which is against to the principles of a cohesive federal system. Ethnic-based boundaries created ethnocentrism rather than

togetherness, which in turn led to suspicion and mistrust of one another. It also divided the people as “indigenous” and ‘settlers’ dichotomy. This created conflicts and exacerbated violence, which weakened the national unity and integrity of the country. The structure is a constraint on the right of citizens to move and work throughout the country. People evict others from the territory that they believe to be their own, which is contrary to the nested nature and assumption of the federal political system. Regional constitutions are the main source of conflicts; for instance, the Benishangul Gumuz Regional State Constitution categorized the people as “indigenous” and “settlers”. The same is true for Oromia and some other Regional State Constitutions. In general, most informants asserted that the post-1991 ethno-linguistic-based administrative boundary structure seriously worsened the federation.

4.5. The challenges of administrative boundary related conflicts on development

Federalism and development are intertwined. Among others, federalism has the advantage of restraining the concentration and abuse of power at the center. Hence, one of the rationales for devolving powers to sub-national governments is to bring development and national unity. By devolving powers, local governments can enhance their infrastructure and investment to effectively ensure sustainable development (Watts, 2008). It is through devolution of power that the principles of equity, fairness, public participation, and unity in diversity are maintained. However, informants in the majority of study centers unanimously confirmed that since 1991, Ethiopians have experienced violence, mass displacement, and killings of innocent citizens because of their belongingness to certain ethnic groups. They also confirmed that ethno-linguistic based boundaries foster the politics of ethnicity rather than “pan-Ethiopianism” attitudes. The system daunted peoples’ mutual co-existence and freedom of movement across regions and become a barrier to investment and development. Most importantly, most regional states have failed to provide adequate legal protection to the rights of citizens and minorities outside their ethnic groups. As a result, citizens and their property are targets of attack and displacement. Thus, ethno-linguistic boundary has significantly affected the country’s overall development endeavors.

5. Conclusion and the way forward

The following concluding remarks are made based on the analysis of the study. Since 1991, administrative boundary-related conflicts have been rampant throughout the country. Each region experienced boundary problems against one or more neighboring regions. As a result, the situation has negatively affected the vertical relationship between regions and the federal government on the one hand; and the horizontal relationship between regions on the other. The ethno-linguistic criterion for establishing the constituent member states of the federation is the fundamental cause of this conflict. This happened so mainly due to the fact that regional constitutions give ownership of a region to particular ethnic group(s), so does the federal constitution that recognizes nations, nationalities and people, not citizens. Thus, other nations, nationalities, and people living in that region have no political representation and are at times subject to mistreatment.

The post-1991 boundary conflicts led to the loss of human life, destruction of property, ethnic-based conflicts, and population displacement at different times across the country. It also poses serious challenges to the state-building process, federalism, and overall development of the country. Administrative boundaries in the federal or other systems of modern governance fall into three principal typologies: historic (cultural), physical, and cartographic. It is up to the society to decide which one or a mix of these administrative boundaries making criteria best fits to Ethiopia. To that end, informants recommended the need for amendment of some provisions of the constitution, pinpointing remaking the federal structure based on geography, shared culture, administrative convenience, history, and psychological makeup of society. Moreover, administrative boundaries should be redrawn, considering the accommodative nature of different ethnic groups. In addition, remaking the federal structure by conducting a sufficient number of public discussions and taking into account the national interest of the country is an indispensable mechanism to providing a lasting solution for these problems.

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