This policy brief explores the prospects of deploying federalism as an instrument of peacebuilding in the context of emerging political reforms in Ethiopia. The appointment of Abiy Ahmed as prime minister in April 2018 by the ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) marks a watershed moment in Ethiopia’s political history. The agenda of political reform adopted by EPRDF was largely due to two interrelated factors. First, the need to overcome the apparent fissures and constant power struggles within the party, especially since the death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2012. Second, as a response to the youth-led mass anti-government protests which started in 2015, primarily in the two most populous regions of the country, Oromia and Amhara.

While the ongoing reforms are generating some optimism, there are also worrisome developments in parts of the country. More than 1.4 million people have been displaced from their homes. The causes of their displacement are inter-ethnic tensions and identity-based communal conflicts over issues such as the ownership of natural resources linked to people’s livelihoods and the location of territorial borders. Those hit hardest by internal displacement are communities living in Gedeo and West Guji in southern Ethiopia and in the border areas of the Oromia and Somali regions. There are also tensions between the Amhara and Tigray regions over the identity of Wolqait and Raya communities.1 Similarly, the Sidama ethnic group’s demand for regional status in southern Ethiopia has created tension in the area. Moreover, there are reports of a breakdown of law and order in parts of the Amhara and Oromia regions.2

A key issue in Ethiopia’s political reform is the future of federalism, in particular, the strong emphasis placed on ethnicity and whether it will continue to be relevant. On the one hand, there are political forces (centrists) that see ethnic federalism as a root cause of the current crisis, while others contend that the

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**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **The Ethiopian government should:**
  - Reach a negotiated consensus about the political reform of the federal system, including its role in creating a conducive atmosphere for equal participation, democracy, and economic development.
  - Give the Federal Supreme Court of Ethiopia the role of final arbiter on constitutional interpretation and dispute resolution to increase the likelihood of impartial rulings.
  - Foster harmonious intergovernmental dialogue and cooperation by establishing stronger inter-governmental relations (IGR) institutions.
  - Replace referendums with more innovative approaches for preventing and resolving territorial disputes, such as power-sharing, joint administration, and bringing disputed territories under federal jurisdiction.
  - Strengthen ties between Ethiopia’s different ethnic groups by promoting pan-Ethiopian identity.
  - Guarantee the protection of the rights of non-territorial minorities who reside outside their “ethnic regions.”

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**Emerging Political Reforms and the Future of Ethiopian Federalism: Policy Options for Stability, Peace, and Development**

By Asnake Kefale
problems are due to non-adherence to the principles of true federalism. However, it is important to note that the federal system is crucial to Ethiopia’s stability, peace, and development. With the opening of political space, the future direction of Ethiopian federalism is being hotly contested. There are political forces that aspire to remove the ethnic element from the federal system or change the system altogether from ethnic to geographic federalism. Such a course of action is fraught with danger. The reactions to the removal of the federal status of Eritrea in 1960 and the autonomy of South Sudan in 1983 demonstrate the inadvisability of reversing regional or ethnic autonomy. In both countries, the rolling back of autonomous arrangements by central authorities was a key factor in the long-running conflicts that culminated in the secession of Eritrea and South Sudan, respectively. The government of Ethiopia (GoE) should, therefore, consider the following policy recommendations:

- **Avoid the danger of “federal reversal”**
  It is important to underscore that any move to dismantle the federal system in Ethiopia would be destabilizing. The country’s politicians and decision-makers need to reach a negotiated consensus about the political reform of the federal system, including its role in creating a conducive atmosphere for equal participation, democracy, and economic development.

- **Enhance the power of the Federal Supreme Court**
  Under the existing constitutional arrangement, it is difficult for the House of Federation (HoF)—the upper house of the federal parliament representing all ethnic groups—as a partisan body, to interpret the constitution and make decisions that would be respected by the different political players. Ethiopia needs a judicial organ that can make impartial rulings to resolve constitutional disputes. The role of final arbiter on constitutional interpretation and dispute resolution should be given to the Federal Supreme Court of Ethiopia. The court should be strengthened and its powers and independence guaranteed by law.

- **Establishment of strong inter-governmental relations (IGR)**
  With the decline in intra-party cohesion in the ruling EPRDF and the challenges facing inter-governmental relations, the federal government should foster harmonious intergovernmental dialogue and cooperation by establishing stronger IGR institutions. These may include creating forums and councils that bring together heads and sectoral officials of federal and regional governments. The federal and regional governments could also work toward replicating similar arrangements for fostering cohesion and development.

- **Intra-federal boundary dispute resolution**
  The centrality of ethnicity to Ethiopia’s federal system continues to pose challenges, including intra-federal and regional boundary conflicts. The resort to referendums for resolving such territorial disputes have only produced limited results. The GoE should replace referendums with more innovative approaches for preventing and resolving territorial disputes, such as power-sharing, joint administration, and bringing disputed territories under federal jurisdiction.

- **Strengthening citizenship and national (pan-Ethiopian) identity**
  The GoE should do more to strengthen ties between Ethiopia’s different ethnic groups. Such measures should go beyond ethnic/regional citizenship. They require establishing proactive policies and actions to widen the political space for democratic participation and contestation. The protection of the rights of minorities, cultural associations, civil society, and economic and political organizations, which bring together Ethiopians from different identity groups, will enhance cohesion and peaceful coexistence in the country. In addition, the government should create a language policy that will facilitate the emergence of a multilingual Ethiopian political elite.

- **Protection of ‘non-territorial’ minorities**
  While the Ethiopian federal system puts a strong emphasis on the convergence of ethnicity and territoriality, there is an equally important need to guarantee the protection of the rights of non-territorial minorities who reside outside their “ethnic regions.” This will greatly help to ease tensions between titular (indigenous) and non-titular (non-indigenous) communities. The lack of an effective system for protecting the lives and properties of these minorities was partly responsible for the displacement of a large number of minorities from ethnically constituted regions. To prevent these challenges, the federal government should consider devising a non-discrimination law which, among other things, investigates and prosecutes culprits and guarantees the compensation of individuals and communities harmed or displaced due to identity-related conflict.

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