ISSN: 2036-5438

The Road Less Travelled: Constitutionalising Internal Secession

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Perspectives on Federalism, Vol. 16, issue 1, 2024

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Abstract

The Ethiopian Constitution uniquely elevates the demand for internal secession to the status of a constitutional right. This right, enshrined in Article 47 of the Constitution, allows the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (NNPs) of Ethiopia, the term the Constitution uses to refer to ethnic groups, to establish their own states, at any time. The right to internal secession is exclusively granted on the sole basis of ethnicity. This approach inextricably links ethnic rights to territorial claims, overlooking other relevant factors such as population size, geography, and administrative efficiency. Moreover, according to the procedures outlined in Article 47(3), it appears as though the federal and state governments are not empowered to play a decisive role in the internal secession process. This represents a significant departure from procedures outlined in other federal jurisdictions, as they impose limitations on the creation of new constituent units by allowing federal parliaments and/or other concerned constituent units to participate in the process. As demands for internal secession continue to surge in the country, the practical implications of this approach in Ethiopia's volatile political landscape are called into question.

Keywords

Ethiopia, ethnic federalism, territorial claims, internal secession, constitutional design

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1. Introduction

Federations are dynamic entities from their inception and are prone to experiencing shifts in internal boundaries over time. They are based upon territorial divisions that are organised into political states, provinces, or regions known as constituent units (CUs) (Anderson 2014). Consequently, many federations incorporate provisions within their constitutions pertaining to the alteration of subnational boundaries, the division of existing states, and the establishment of new ones. However, the Ethiopian Constitution differs from its counterparts by elevating the demand for the creation of new CUs to the status of a constitutional right. In this regard, the ability of ethnic groups to break away from the states in which they are found (i.e. internal secession), is accorded significant legal status.

Article 47 (2) stipulates that '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*.' The Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (NNPs) in this context refer to the various ethnic groups that inhabit Ethiopia.[1] Accordingly, a further distinguishing factor of the Ethiopian Constitution is that the right to internal secession is exclusively granted to ethnic groups and is not accessible based on alternative criteria such as territorial, economic, or administrative claims. Furthermore, according to the procedures outlined in Article 47(3), it appears as though the Federal government and State councils are not empowered to play a decisive role in the internal secession process. According to Fessha and Ayele (2021), this represents a significant departure from procedures outlined in other federal jurisdictions, as they impose limitations on the creation of new constituent units by allowing federal parliaments and/or other concerned constituent units to participate in the process. The recent influx of demands for internal secession in Ethiopia, most notably from the southern region, has underscored the challenges inherent in enshrining internal secession as a constitutional right and the procedures involved in its realisation.

This paper aims to critically analyse the nature and status of the right to internal secession in the Ethiopian Constitution. It is structured into three interrelated parts: Part two discusses the status of the right to internal secession in the Ethiopian Constitution and the criterion upon which it is based. Part three examines procedural aspects, namely how the process is initiated, the involved actors, and the degree of consensus (if any) required from affected

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states and citizens in surrounding areas. These procedures are also discussed in light of recent state developments in the southern region, serving as a case study to assess the disjunction between rhetorical assertions and practical implementation before concluding with brief remarks.

1.1 The Road to Ethiopian Federalism

Ethiopia's administrative landscape has witnessed some significant transformations from the late 19th to early 20th century. This period in history was characterised by shifts in regional structures, marked by phases of highly centralised authority, which were notably influenced by imperial rule and later by the Dergue military regime (Deressa 2024: 8). The process of decentralisation began when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) assumed power in 1991.[II] Having identified the 'nationality question' as the fundamental issue in Ethiopia, the EPRDF developed an ideology with the promise of resolving this issue. As a result, the Constitution of 1995 established a system of ethnic federalism primarily founded on the principle of self-determination, which expressly encompasses the right of every ethnic community to both external and internal self-determination (Fessha and Ayele 2021).

Yet, regardless of the expansive protection that the right to self-determination enjoys, there appears to be an apparent mismatch between the conceptual starting point of the Constitution, which conceives every ethnic group as the original negotiator and founding member of the federation that is entitled to a state of its own, and the initial nine-states organisation of the federation (Belay and Belay 2019: 101-102). Originally only five *kilils* (states) – Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Tigray, Somali, were established as 'core nationality regions,' in the sense that they are dominated overwhelmingly by a single group on whose names the states are designated and run by their languages (Bihonegn 2015: 49).[III] The remaining four – Harari, Benishagul-Gumuz, SNNPRS (Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Regional State) and Gambella were heterogeneous and comprised of different groups with none of them making up a majority (Bihonegn 2015: 49). The unique ethnic composition of the country means that smaller ethnic groups inhabit areas where other ethnic groups dominate in number. This creates immense difficulty when trying to draw "clean borders" that do not result in the perpetual creation of "fresh minorities" (Belay and Belay 2019: 101-102). Thus, the same problem the Constitution was ostensibly created to

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resolve at a national level has been replicated on a subnational level throughout the country. The Constitution attempts to reconcile this apparent conflict by giving each ethnic group the right to create their own state This will be the focus of the subsequent discussion.

2. Constitutional Framework

2.1 Ethnicity and the Right to Internal Secession

As previously highlighted, Article 47(2) affords the ethnic groups of Ethiopia 'the right to establish, at any time, their own states' (Belay and Belay 2019: 101-102). Here we see the ability of ethnic groups to break away from the state and form their own "mother states" as a clear depiction that internal secession forms part of the right to self-determination. Whereas a constitution that allows for the creation of new subnational units is not particularly unheard of, the Ethiopian Constitution is exceptional in that it elevates the demand for the creation of a new subnational unit to the status of a constitutional right (Fessha and Ayele 2021). A further distinguishing factor is that it requires no justification from those seeking their own state, as the claimants are not required to demonstrate a legitimate condition that warrants internal secession, considering that the right exists independently (Fessha and Ayele 2021). Strikingly, Article 47(2) establishes ethnicity as the sole criterion for state creation. If these provisions were to be taken at face value, it would appear that every ethnic group regardless of size, geographic location, economic considerations, administrative efficiency, or logistical reasons, would be entitled to have their own state. Hence, it may be argued that, due to the manner in which Article 47 was drafted, ethnic rights are now inextricably linked to territorial claims (Dessalegn and Afesha 2019: 87).

Despite efforts to re-draw the internal borders along ethnic lines, the states of Ethiopia, often viewed as homogeneous, actually display a considerable degree of heterogeneity. When the charter of the transitional government and subsequently the Constitution bestowed territory to select ethnic groups (known as the titular groups), these groups began to perceive their states as property that fell within their exclusive domain. It could be argued that this sense of ownership is a natural consequence of the substantive powers granted to state governments under the Constitution;[IV] which often has the effect of alienating the non-titular

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minority groups living in that region (Carvosso 2020: 681). Thus, faced with a sense of powerlessness, it is not surprising why internal minorities would opt to secede and form their own "mother-sate" in which they have access to the federal purse and a sense of greater autonomy to regulate their own affairs. Moreover, the question remains whether the ever-increasing demands for recognition and self-determination can be reconciled with the threats of territorial land and ethnic fragmentations.

2.2. The subjects of the right to internal secession: Determining Ethnic Identity

According to the Constitution, if territorial autonomy through internal secession is the door that needs to be opened to enjoy the above-mentioned privileges, ethnicity is the only key that can unlock it. This makes the question of who qualifies as an NNP (i.e. ethnic group) and how a group attains recognition a pertinent one. Fortunately, the Siltie's pursuit of recognition as a distinct nationality has resolved procedurally, if not politically, these essential constitutional questions (Smith 2013: 120).

In the literature, the designation "Eastern Gurage" originates from linguists who distinguish between one category of Ethiopian Semitic language-speakers referred to collectively as "Gurage" and their Cushitic-speaking counterparts (Woldeselassie 2017: 2). These linguists have categorised Gurage speakers into three primary groups: Northern Gurage, Western Gurage, and Eastern Gurage. However, until recently no inter-group organisation or identity formation has been observed by the Eastern Gurage speakers. This changed between 1991-2001 after a successful campaign that led to the official state recognition of the Eastern-Gurage-speaking population as one of the many distinct "nationality" groups within the Ethiopian federal state system (Woldeselassie 2017: 2). While historically, there appeared to be no official ethnonym for the Eastern Gurage speakers, the name Siltie was adopted from one major clan of people called Silti,[V] to represent the rest of the Eastern-Gurage-speaking population (Woldeselassie 2017: 3). Their pursuit of recognition commenced in the early nineties, during which, despite not speaking the same language, the "Siltie" group were regarded as Gurage (Deressa 2024). Considering that language was the primary criteria utilised by the transitional government to identify distinct ethnic groups, the rationale for their earlier designation as Gurage remains somewhat unclear.[VI]A few years later, Siltie political parties began to form, most notably the Siltie

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Peoples Democratic Unity Party (SPDUP), to pursue legal and constitutional recognition of the Siltie group (Smith 2007: 580).

Up until this point, it was unclear how exactly communities ought to be recognised as distinct ethnic groups. Remarkably, the position of the ruling party at the time seemed to contradict their initial messaging on the sacrosanctity of ethnic recognition. At first, they were particularly reluctant to acknowledge the Siltie as a separate ethnic identity. According to Smith (2007: 580), the initial stance of the federal government was that the Siltie were considered part of the Gurage ethnic group and that they were 'essentially the same community, differing only in language, and that over time they would assimilate into the Gurage identity'. Subsequently, the Siltie made a petition for recognition to the council of the Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS). Although this type of matter falls within the jurisdiction of state governments, the matter was referred to the House of Federation (HoF), the second chamber of the federal parliament. In 1997, after a meeting was organised in the town of Butajira with representatives from various parts of the Siltie community, a resolution was passed that rejected the distinctiveness claim of the Siltie and the matter was considered closed by the ruling party (Markakis 1998).[VII] However, that was not the end of the matter. The issue was brought before the HoF for the second time and it was sent to the Council of Constitutional Inquiry (the Council), the expert body that advises the HoF. The Council identified two constitutional issues that needed to be resolved in this case: (1) 'According to the FDRE Constitution, who has the power to decide about the identity of a given group of people?' and (2) 'What procedure should be followed to do that?' (Smith 2007: 581).

Regarding the first question, the Council claimed that identity issues relating to the rights of NNPs and self-determination were within the mandate of the HoF to decide (Dessalegn and Van der Beken 2020: 132). Subsequently, this interpretation was confirmed by Proclamation No. 251/2001[VIII] and is also reflected in the more recent amendment, Proclamation No. 1261/2021.[IX] As outlined in articles 4(3) and 24(1) of the latter, the HoF decides on issues relating to the rights of NNPs to self-determination, including the right to secession (See for example, Deressaa. 2024:12).

Concerning the procedure that has to be followed to determine ethnic identity, it was established that the recognition of an ethnic group would be determined in line with the criteria outlined in Article 39(5). According to Article 39(5), a 'Nation, Nationality or People

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for the purpose of this Constitution, is 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 who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory'. In the Siltie case, it was established that communities claiming a distinct identity are required to prove that they meet these criteria. Consequently, the HoF determined that claimants are first required to submit a petition in writing showing that they meet the above-mentioned criteria (Dessalegn and Van der Beken 2020: 133). The role of the state council is to check whether the requirements set under Article 39(5) have been complied with. Once they prove that there is sufficient case, the state Council is expected to prepare a referendum and the concerned community proceeds to decide on the final fate of the identity question through direct participation in the ballot (Smith 2007: 582). Accordingly, the Hof came to the decision that the Siltie had presented a compelling argument for their recognition as a distinct "nationality", warranting, at the very least, the opportunity for a referendum on the issue. In 2001, such a referendum took place, posing the question 'Are the Siltie Gurage or not?' (See also Smith 2007: 582). The outcome was resoundingly affirmative, with over 99% of the vote in favour of the Siltie's separation from the Gurage.

What the Siltie judgment failed to adequately address is whether the requirements of Article 39(5) needed to be fulfilled cumulatively. In 2008, while deliberating on another petition, the Council of Nationalities (CoN) in the SNNPRS –mandated with the power of settling identity determination issues at the *state level*– ruled that a claimant community does not need to fulfil all the five criteria cumulatively (Dessalegn and Afesha 2019: 70). However, the CoN has subsequently backtracked on this stance, and the prevailing interpretation is that these are cumulative standards essential for analysing and determining identity claims (Dessalegn and Afesha 2019: 70). This interpretation could prove to be problematic since different communities who identify as distinct ethnic groups might not be able to meet all the requirements outlined in Article 39(5). For instance, language was a key criterion when recognising distinct ethnic groups and partitioning the country accordingly, during the transitional period. However, not all ethnic groups have a "mother tongue" and vice versa (Hudson 2012). Moreover, in the years since the Siltie decision, various procedural inconsistencies and irregularities have emerged in addressing requests for recognition. Beyond the Siltie instance, which reached a resolution through a referendum, other cases

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presented to the HoF have been handled through decisions made by the HoF directly, referred back to regional state councils, or are currently awaiting judgment by the HoF. According to Kedir (2021: 23), this suggests that the HoF lacks a standardised and predictable approach when determining ethnic identity.

Article 47 clearly states that the right to internal secession is inherent to all ethnic groups within Ethiopia. However, as the preceding discussion has elucidated, accessing this "right" poses considerable challenges for many ethnic groups due to various hurdles, such as ethnic recognition, which must be overcome before initiating the internal secession process. Consequently, an underlying constitutional assumption emerges: certain ethnic groups are deemed inherently deserving of recognition and associated benefits, while others must substantiate their presence (Kedir 2021: 23). The obvious quagmire that this creates is that there is a right in the Constitution that is an intrinsic entitlement, vested in *all* the NNP's of Ethiopia but is not accessible to all ethnic groups on an equal basis.

3. Consensus in the Self-Determination Process

The essence of good political institutions is that they make political idiocy more difficult (but not impossible) to achieve.

Hammel (1993: 40)

It is a fact universally acknowledged that political power tends to be inherently fragile, and even the most elegantly crafted constitutions are only as good as the humans who choose to abide by the rules set out in them. However, this does not negate the value that constitutional engineers have to offer when it comes to resolving the various socio-political issues prevalent in divided societies. So while it is important to recognise the limitations of what the design of political institutions can achieve, it is also important to use the available tools of constitutional design to, as Hammel best put it, make political idiocy harder to achieve (Anderson and Vaughn 2021).

As previously discussed, the Ethiopian Constitution differs from its counterparts in that it appears to have elevated the *demand* for the creation of new constituent units to the status of a constitutional right (Fessha and Ayele 2021). This right is exclusively afforded to ethnic groups and is not available based on alternative criteria such as territorial claims. Moreover,

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it appears that the federal government and state governments have no decisive role in the process. This is a key departure from other constitutions, which often place limitations on the creation of new constituent units by allowing federal parliaments and/or other concerned constituent units to have a say in the process (Fessha and Ayele 2021). The central question remains: does the process for internal secession, as outlined by the Constitution, make the aspiration of establishing one's own state an achievable reality or a mere pipe dream? The following discussion contends that these constitutional provisions display weaknesses and gaps since they affect the achievement of the constitutional objectives, involve serious risks for the rights of (persons belonging to) other ethnic groups, and exacerbate ethnic conflict while undermining social cohesion (Van der Beken 2021).

3.1. Initiating the Process

Article 47 (3)(a) provides that the right of any Nation, Nationality or People to form its own state is exercisable under the following procedures:[X]

> When the demand for statehood has been approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Council of the Nation, Nationality or People concerned, and the demand is presented in writing to the State Council.

This procedure tends to resemble the one for secession in Article 39(4)(a) which stipulates that the procedure to exercise the right to self-determination, including secession, of every NNP, shall be triggered 'when a demand for secession has been approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Legislative Council of the Nation, Nationality or People concerned'.[XI] This petition can only be entertained if a two-thirds majority of the members of the council of the NNP approve. This is obviously a reference to the local government council.

As previously noted, state governments wield significant substantive powers and are tasked with managing their states and drafting their state constitutions. As a result, uniformity of local government, in terms of structure and type, cannot be guaranteed. However, a general survey of local government in the country would reveal that a multi-layered local government is established across the country (Ayele and Fessha 2012: 97). These include, but are not limited to, the establishment of zones, woredas (districts)[XII], and Kebeles (wards)

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(Article 52(1)).[XIII] State governments have also created ethnic-based local governments, known as *liyu* (special) woredas and nationality zones, through which internal minorities are expected to exercise autonomy, a response to the practical challenges impossibility of providing each major ethnic group with a designated "mother state"(See for example Ayele 2014: 96). Nationality zones are established to serve as institutions of self-governance for intra-state ethnic minority communities spanning two or more districts, while a liyu woreda is established to govern a community inhabiting a single district (Chigwata et al 2021: 194). Each nationality zone, liyu woreda, woreda and city should have a representative council composed of elected representatives and an executive appointed by the local council (Chigwata et al 2021: 194). Nationality zones and liyu woredas exhibit a departure from conventional local governance frameworks within Ethiopia as their establishment is predicated upon the imperative of territorial accommodation for ethnic groups, thus reflecting the nation's ethno-federalist structure.

The question is whether every local government council can initiate internal secession. Given that the right to internal secession is reserved for ethnic communities, it is submitted that it is not every local government council that can initiate internal secession but the council of ethnically based local government. It is only a petition that is approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of the council of the special woreda or the nationality zone of NNP that can be entertained by the state council.

3.2. The Role of the Federal and State Governments

Upon receipt of the written claim for internal secession from the council of the concerned NNP, the relevant state council is required to initiate a referendum, as outlined in Article 47(3)(b):[XIV]

> When the Council that received the demand has organized a referendum within one year to be held in the Nation, Nationality or People that made the demand.

The State Council does not seem to have the discretion to refuse the application. Instead, it is obligated to arrange a referendum within a year of receiving such an application. Nevertheless, the Constitution does not specify any consequences for failing to organise the referendum within the specified timeframe (Belay and Belay 2019: 105). Article 25(2)-(4) of Proclamation 1261/2021[XV] attempts to fill in the gaps by creating a right to appeal to the

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House of Federation that can be exercised by a party claiming that its demand for state formation has not been executed within the time specified or alleges to have dissatisfaction with the decision. Such a complaint has to be presented to the House in writing by the Council of the NNP that claimed for the formation of the State. The House is then expected to provide a final decision within two years of receiving the complaint.[XVI] The aforementioned provisions suggest a tendency towards relaxing the stringent requirements outlined in the Constitution. By introducing an appeals process to the House of Federation, the proclamation not only anticipates the possibility of the referendum exceeding the one-year timeframe but also grants the House a two-year window to deliberate on the appeal. Nonetheless, it remains unclear whether the HoF, as an organ of the federal government, possesses the discretion to reject such an application. Should this question be affirmed, it implies a more pronounced role for the federal government in the process of new state formation than initially envisioned by the Constitution.

Recently, this issue was raised in the context of the Sidama quest for statehood. Political activists in the Sidama community, who had been agitating for their own state for a very long time, took advantage of the internal crisis the ruling party was facing and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's subsequent ascent to power in 2018 to initiate the process of internal secession (Tronvoll et al 2020: 11).[XVII] According to the International Crisis Group (2019), key members of this movement were the Sidama youth known as the *Ejjeetto* ("hero", in the Sidama language), who were instrumental in influencing the political elites in the capital city of Hawassa and elsewhere in the Sidama zone. Many other ethnic groups living in the vicinity were targeted in the turmoil as, according to Davidson (2018), the Sidama intended to manifest 'ownership' of the city. In the aftermath, interviews with non-Sidama observers revealed that those who orchestrated the chaos during the violent protests claimed that the 'land belongs to them' and all other clans should be 'kicked out'. The protests amplified the interests of both government and opposition politicians, ultimately leading to the Sidama Nationality Zone Council endorsing the demand for a separate regional state on 18 July 2018 (Davidson 2018; Tronvoll et al 2020: 11).[XVIII]

As per constitutional procedures, the Sidama Zone Council's request for statehood was submitted to the SNNPRS state Council for further processing. According to Article 47(3), the State Council would then be responsible for organising a referendum. This would mean forwarding instructions to the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), to carry out a

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referendum within one year. Ultimately, the SNNPRS Council submitted a letter on 20 November to NEBE instructing them to facilitate a referendum on the Sidama request (Tronvoll et al 2020:11). After receiving said instructions, the NEBE, who at the time was engaged in institutional, legal, and structural reforms, and did not have the capacity to address the Sidama referendum, hesitated on whether or not to start preparing for the referendum.[XIX] Their prolonged silence on the matter intensified speculations on whether or not there were ulterior motives for their non-reaction to the Council's demand.[XX] The delay prompted activists to mobilise a group of Sidama lawyers, who argued that the undue delay in holding the referendum justified a unilateral declaration of statehood (Verjee 2019). The perceived resistance and obstructionism from federal authorities and institutions played a role in fostering unity across Sidama society. Consequently, the notion of a unilateral declaration of statehood garnered widespread support (Tronvoll et al 2020: 13).

In response, Prime Minister Abiy addressed parliament on 1 July, acknowledging the constitutionality of Southern Nations' statehood demands but emphasising that they must be addressed through the appropriate procedure once the new board of the NEBE is fully operational. (Tronvoll et al 2020: 13). He cautioned that failure to follow the correct procedure for declaring statehood could lead to federal intervention, and a federal official revealed that the Abiy administration was receptive to the idea of Sidama statehood but preferred to address it within the framework of a constitutional reform process. However, according to the International Crisis Group (2019), concerns among government officials regarding their ability to manage the situation were palpable and the government's senior ranks were worried they would not be able to handle the opening of the "Pandora's box". Two days prior to 18 July 2019 (one year to the day after the request had been submitted), the NEBE announced that it needed an additional five months to prepare for a referendum, to be conducted on 13 November 2019. This prompted accusations against the state government of SNNPRS;[XXI] of collusion with the federal government, leading to unrest among the Ejjeetto, who debated between demanding a unilateral declaration or advocating for a delayed referendum, ultimately agreeing to postpone the declaration plan and hold discussions on 18 July 2019 in Hawassa city instead (Tronvoll et al 2020: 13).

Considering the incredible violence and inter/intra-ethnic conflict that had been witnessed in the quest for Sidama's statehood. The NEBE initially demanded that the SNNPRS develop legal protection for non-Sidama living in Hawassa; the demand was

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nevertheless rejected, as the SNNPRS Council stated that the Constitution and the laws of the land regulate such issues and that there was no need for special legislation pertaining only to Hawassa City (Tronvoll et al 2020: 14). Subsequently, on 18 October, the SNNPRS Council approved the legal framework for a transition with 168 voting in favour, 55 against, and 23 abstentions. But finally, after much deliberation, on 15 October 2019, NEBE decided to postpone the referendum for one week, pushing it back to 20 November.[XXII] The organisation blamed the SNNRPS for being late in developing the legal and regulatory framework of a possible Sidama transition process to regional statehood.[XXIII] On 20 November 2019, an overwhelming 98.5 per cent of the votes tallied were cast in favour of statehood (Misikir 2021).

According to Belay and Belay (2019: 106), it is evident that the roles of the national and state governments underwent their first test in the context of the Sidama quest for statehood when a referendum was not organised within the constitutionally specified one-year period. Many proponents of Sidama statehood argued that the failure to conduct the referendum within the designated timeframe entitled them to unilaterally declare statehood (Belay and Belay 2019: 106). While this threat was not realised, the violence that erupted in the state amid the controversy has brought the problematic nature of the constitutionally provided procedure to the forefront. Although it grants ethnic communities the right to request internal secession, it doesn't explicitly oblige Federal or Regional State governments to comply (Fessha 2019). According to Fessha (2019), the absence of this obligation leaves room for interpretation, potentially suggesting the possibility of negotiation. Subordinate legislation such as Article 25(2), (3), and (4) of Proclamation No. 1261/2021 offers some clarification on the process to be followed should the State Council fail to organise a referendum within a year. However, it does not address the core issue of whether the State Council has the discretion to reject these applications for substantive reasons. Nor does it confirm whether the House of Federation, effectively acting as an appellant division in these instances, possesses the authority to do so.

The wording of Proclamation Article 25(2) and (4) seems to be purposely drafted to be ambiguous:

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> 2. Any party claiming that the question of state formation has not been executed within the time specified in sub-article 1(b) of this Article or alleges to have dissatisfaction with the decision, may appeal to the House;
>
> …
>
> 4. The House shall make a final decision within two years on issues presented to it in such a procedure;

The verbiage used in the sentence 'alleges dissatisfaction with the decision' denotes that the state Council does have the discretion to reject said application. However, there is no indication whether this rejection may be purely based on procedural grounds or not. The wording in these subsections creates ambiguity, potentially suggesting that both the state and federal governments could deny statehood applications based on undisclosed criteria. This appears to be an attempt by the federal government to establish greater control over the process, akin to a claw-back provision. Arguably, seeking more control in the decision-making process is neither inherently problematic nor procedurally unsound.[XXIV] The issue here lies in the Ethiopian Constitution, which explicitly grants all NNPs the right of internal secession without specifying a decisive role for federal and state governments (Belay and Belay 2019: 106). Consequently, as this ambiguity persists, the federal government's efforts to empower itself in retrospect, through regulations such as the ones mentioned above, run the risk of encroaching upon constitutionally enshrined rights vested in the NNPs of Ethiopia.

3.3. The Use of Referendums

According to Anderson (2014: 12), federations such as Iraq, Switzerland, Germany, and Nigeria, have procedures for creating new CUs that involve referendums (and in some cases a right of initiative). Nonetheless, the thresholds for approval vary greatly as do the rules regarding the procedure for initiating a referendum (Anderson 2014: 12). Typically these referendums require a specified majority vote and, in some instances, there may be an additional requirement for the approval of any affected constituent units or by some number of all CUs, as well as the national legislature. The Ethiopian Constitution not only fails to specify a decisive role for Federal or state governments in the procedures outlined in Article 47(3). It also fails to consider the role of other ethnic minorities living in the state which would be affected by the outcome of said process. Instead, Article 47(3)(c) merely stipulates

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that the right of NNPs to form their own state is exercisable if, amongst other things, '[T]he demand for statehood is supported by a majority vote in the referendum'.[XXV]

The Ethiopian approach stands in sharp contrast to the position adopted in federations such as, for example, Germany. The complicated referendum process, as provided in the Basic Law,[XXVI] begins with a federal law which must be approved by a majority vote in a referendum in both the area of the new Land and the remaining areas of the affected Land or *Länder*. Alternatively, it must achieve a two-thirds majority in the territory of the proposed new Land while not being rejected by more than two-thirds of voters in the affected Land (Anderson 2014: 13). Another example is the case of Switzerland, which requires a far higher threshold. In Article 53(1)-(4) it is stipulated that any change in the number of Cantons requires the consent of both of the Cantons concerned together with the consent of a majority of voters and Cantons in a national referendum (Anderson 2014: 13). If the majority of the population and the cantons, and if the federal power agreed, the proposal of the people would be implemented.[XXVII]

The above examples demonstrate a desire to mitigate the potential adverse outcomes of creating new states, such as excessive politically motivated demands for statehood and inter- and intra-state conflicts, while also providing citizens with an opportunity to express their consent regarding proposals for new states. However, the Ethiopian Constitution appears to overlook this aspect, creating a virtual breeding ground for politically driven demands for internal secession. In this environment, politicians and activists are unrestricted by any reservations about offending other ethnic groups, thus disincentivising them from adjusting their rhetoric and tactics. If the Constitution had included a provision requiring the consent of the majority of citizens in the neighbouring or affected states, or a majority vote in a national referendum, groups like the *Ejjeetto* and other activists advocating for their own state, as discussed below, might not have resorted so readily to violence against non-Sidama residents or employed harsh rhetoric implying the expulsion of these residents from "their land" in order to gain favour with other ethnic groups in Ethiopia.

3.3.1. Voter Eligibility

The Constitution is rather vague and does not stipulate 'who' is eligible to participate in the referendum procedure. Unsurprisingly, this was the most controversial issue discussed in the voter registration process in the case of Sidama's quest for their own state. The issue

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is key and hinges on whether eligibility is based on the ethnicity or residency principle. Some argue that the Constitution tacitly endorses the ethnicity principle based on the Constitutional phrase that the referendum shall be held 'in the Nation, Nationality or People that made the demand,' and thereby grants the ethnic group claiming a new state a monopoly right on the referendum (Afesha and Barrett 2024: 10). Others claim that the residency principle can be advocated for when the statehood claim is made.[XXVIII] It is reported in Tronvoll et al (2020: 15) that the NEBE initially wanted to implement a residence clause under which a minimum residency of five years in Sidama would be a requirement to be eligible to vote. Sidama activists pushed back against this, interpreting it as an attempt to diminish the influence of Sidama voters in Hawassa City.[XXIX] Ultimately, the NEBE declared that any individual above the age of 18 residing in the Sidama Zone for six months prior to registration would be eligible to vote.[XXX] This could be interpreted to mean that non-Sidama residents in the Zone were also eligible to participate in the process.

However, the political context during the registration process was perceived as having intimidated non-Sidama residents living in Hawassa and its environs.[XXXI] The large-scale violence and killings during the summers of 2018-2019 resulted in several members of the Wolayta ethnic group being murdered by the Ejjeetto activists, which appeared to have scared many non-Sidamas away from participating in the referendum process.[XXXII] According to Tronvoll et al (2020: 18), it appears plausible to suggest that the majority of non-Sidamas opted not to register, potentially influenced by a politically intimidating and non-conducive environment. This scenario highlights the risks associated with formulating a process for establishing new states, as outlined in the Constitution, which solely relies on the ethnic group initiating the demand. This approach undoubtedly empowers malicious actors to employ any means necessary, including inciting chaos, violence and intimidation to attain their desired goals.

3.3.2. Reframing Self-Determination: Exploring Collaborative Statehood Demands

Less than a year after Sidama Zone succeeded in creating their own state via referendum in 2019, a new multi-ethnic region began to emerge. Between November 2018 and April 2019, a series of events unfolded whereby at least three zonal units unanimously endorsed the idea of independence from the SNNPRS. These endorsements were made at their respective zonal councils, following which formal requests were submitted to the assembly

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of the SNNPRS. On the 30th of September 2020, five zone-level administrations and one district in the region, namely Kaffa, Sheka, Bench-Sheko, Dawuro and West Omo Zones, and Konta Special district put aside their individual requests for statehood and voted unanimously for a referendum on creating a joint South West State.[XXXIII] This petition was endorsed by the HoF, which then requested that NEBE arrange a plebiscite. In September 2021, a referendum was held on the same day as the second round of national elections, which, according to the NEBE, attracted 93.8 per cent of the 1.3 million people registered to vote. An overwhelming majority, around 1.2 million people, voted in support of creating the State of South West Region (SWEP) (Tsegaye 2023).

The emergence of the state of the SWEP region is particularly notable because the Constitution seemingly envisions the right to self-determination for a specific NNP. This interpretation suggests that NNPs integrated within existing states only have the option to form their own state if they secede by following the procedures outlined in Article 47(3). However, the creation of the new SWEP state in 2021 involved more than ten NNPs. In this case, the ethnic groups residing in five zones and one special woreda, who initially sought separate statehood, abandoned their original claims in favour of establishing an ethnically clustered state. The successful establishment of statehood by the SWEP introduces a new dimension to the statehood process and has sparked numerous contentious issues.

The SWEP statehood quest not only challenges conventional interpretations of self-determination but also prompts critical reflections on the Constitution's conceptualisation of ethnic homeland as the primary mechanism for achieving self-determination. By choosing collaboration over exclusion, the SWEP's formation underscores the potential for a more inclusive and cooperative approach to statehood, wherein NNPs exercise their right to self-determination through association rather than the unilateral pursuit of an exclusive ethnic homeland. In essence, the SWEP's emergence presents a compelling case study that reaffirms the notion that self-determination can be realised through diverse and collaborative arrangements, wherein ethnic groups express their will at the ballot box in a manner that fosters unity and cooperation, rather than fragmentation and division.

The SWEP referendum raises questions about the "majority vote" required in the constitutional referendum procedure when it is ethnic clusters claiming statehood. For instance, should the outcome of the referendum be decided based on the combined majority or should each distinct majority have the right to decide separately? The NEBE used a simple

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majority vote system to decide the outcome of the SWEP referendum. This is despite the differences in ethnic population sizes amongst the clustered ethnic communities. Table 1 illustrates that even if only the members of the Kafa and Bench-Sheko communities endorsed separate statehood, the referendum outcome would still favour state formation based on a majority vote.

Table 1. Ethnic make-up of SWEP arranged by size of population: Source Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census.

No	Name of the zone	Population size	Percent
1	Kafa	874,716	33.9%
2	Bench-Sheko	652,531	25.2%
3	Dawro	489,577	19%
4	West Omo	272,943	10.6%
5	Sheka zone	199,314	7.7%
6	Konta Special District	90,846	3.5%
Total Population		2,579, 927	100%

The significance of this issue was brought to the forefront in 2023 with the creation of the South Ethiopia State, when six zones and five special woredas, in the SNNPRS held a referendum on statehood (Tadesse 2023).[xxxiv] The NEBE declared the approved results of the referendum of all zones and special woredas except Wolayta, who had long been advocating for their own state. Despite the Wolayta groups' objection, on April 28, 2023, the Southern Ethiopia State was created. This was followed by the Central Ethiopia State, which was formed with what remained of the SNNPRS.[xxxv] Similar to the Wolayta, the Gurage nationality group also objected to joining the new clustering system in the new Central Ethiopian State and aimed to establish their own separate statehood. However, unlike the Sidama nation, their demands were ultimately suppressed and reversed.

This prompts a critical examination of the rights accorded to minority ethnic groups, particularly those who may have dissented against the establishment of a new state, and the representation of their preferences in this process. Considering that the Constitution is ambiguous on how ethnically clustered claims for statehood should be handled, including the matter of voting rights and territorial proximity, it becomes evident that the simple majority vote system enshrined in Article 47(3) fails to adequately ensure the protection of minority ethnic rights. Arguably, according to Beken (2021: 956), ‘the requirement of an

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ordinary majority vote in the referendum significantly reduces the chances for effective minority participation.' Thus, within the ambit of safeguarding minority interests, this framework is demonstrably deficient (Afesha and Barrett 2024: 8). Likewise, if a two-thirds majority requirement had been in place instead of a simple majority for the referendum, or if a majority vote was required from every affected minority group, it would have ensured a more robust representation of the wishes of minority groups residing in the various regions.

4. Conclusion

As the preceding discussion elucidates, the Ethiopian Federal system faces complex challenges in striking a balance between ethnic autonomy and national unity. The ambiguity surrounding the federal government's role in the creation of new states and its subsequent efforts to empower itself through sub-ordinate legislation risks infringing upon the constitutionally enshrined rights vested in the NNPs of Ethiopia. Additionally, lessons from other jurisdictions underscore the importance of consensus in the self-determination process to ensure the legitimacy and stability of internal secession movements, particularly in cases that involve ethnic clusters seeking statehood. Furthermore, the case study of recent statehood developments in the southern region reveals a substantial disconnect between the initial rhetorical assertions of the federal government and the practical implementation of constitutionally enshrined rights. This raises concerns about the exacerbation of societal grievances, ethnic tension, and violence both within and between ethnic groups. Moving forward, it is essential to critically assess the potential consequences of relying exclusively on ethnicity as the basis for the right to internal secession, emphasising the need for inclusive and transparent processes that promotes unity while respecting the diverse identities within the Ethiopian federation. Hence, highlighting the need for clear constitutional amendments to address these pivotal issues.

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[I] Article 39(5): A 'Nation, Nationality or People' for the purpose of this Constitution, is 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 who inhabit an identifiable,

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predominantly contiguous territory. Many other articles or sub-articles of the Constitution are substantially either specifications or elaborations of Article 39, or contextualization's of ethnicity within the state structure. See Constitution's 'Preamble'; Art.2; Art.3.2; Art.5; Art.8.1; Art.34.6; Art.35 Art.40.3; Art.41.9; Art.46.1-2; Art.47.2-9; Art.61.1; Art.88.1-2; Art.89.4-6; Art.91.1; Art.94.

[II] In May 1991, the EPRDF overthrew the former dictatorial government, the Derg (military committee), ending almost a decade of devastating civil war. The EPRDF was a coalition of ethnically-based armed groups, which the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) formed during the war.

[III] Kilils are the Ethiopian equivalent for US states and Swiss cantons. In 2019, Sidama became the first new state created since the inception of the 1995 Constitution, following a referendum that garnered a 98% vote in favour of internal secession. However, as of yet, no constitutional amendments have been made to include it and/or other subsequent new states in the list of states enumerated in Article 47(1).

[IV] Article 52 (1) & (2) grant vast power to states including but not limited to: (b) enacting the state constitution, (c) to formulate and execute economic, social and development policies, strategies and plans of the State; (d) to administer land and other natural resources in accordance with Federal laws.

[V] In the literature, variant versions of this term exist, including 'Siltie', 'Silte' 'Silt'e' and 'Selti' However, it is important to differentiate between Siltie and Silti. The term Siltie refers to the post-1991 formation of collective identity that constitutes the various clan and territorial groups historically known in the literature as the Eastern Gurage. Nonetheless, the term Silti refers to one of the clans or dialect groups of the Eastern Gurage.

[VI] Some authors have suggested that this was due to the close proximity of the two different groups and their shared hardships and subjugation under the reign of Emperor Menelik, which united the Siltie with their Gurage neighbours. Despite this, there are clear indications early in the transitional period that the Siltie pushed for the recognition of their own language.

[VII] Nevertheless, the ruling party did acknowledge that the Siltie people, at the very least, had a distinct language and it was this recognition that facilitated the legal process undertaken by the SPDUP.

[VIII] Consolidation of the House of the Federation and Definition of its Powers and Responsibilities Proclamation No. 251/2001, Federal Negarit Gazeta, Year 7, No. 41.

[IX] A Proclamation to amend the Proclamation Defining the Powers and Functions of the HoF of the Federal Democratic republic of Ethiopia No. 1261/2021,Federal Negarit Gazeta, Year 28, No 4.

[X] Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995.

[XI] However, there exists a slight difference in the wording of the two provisions. Notably, Article 39(4)(a) refers to the 'Legislative Council' of the NNP, while Article 47(3)(a) only refers to "'the Council" of the Nation, Nationality or People concerned.' This prompts consideration regarding whether this distinction implies a substantive difference in meaning. Essentially, does Article 39(4)(a) refine the term 'Council' by introducing the qualifier 'Legislative'?

[XII] A woreda, is a territorial area equivalent to a district with approximately 100,000 residents. Typically established in rural areas on wall-to-wall basis, with the aim of fostering public participation and delivery of basic services.

[XIII] All powers not given expressly to the Federal Government alone, or concurrently to the Federal Government and the States are reserved to the States.

[XIV] Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995.

[XV] See Article 19(3) of Proclamation No. 251/2001 which preceded this.

[XVI] See Article 25 (2), (3) and (4) of A Proclamation to amend the Proclamation Defining the Powers and Functions of the HoF of the Federal Democratic republic of Ethiopia No. 1261/2021.

[XVII] Since the inception of the SNNPRS, there have been numerous initiatives launched by ethnic groups to form new ethnic administrative units, from the level of local government such as woreda's all the way up to the regional state level. The SNNPRS has endorsed many of these claims up to a zonal level, however, up until 2019 it has repeatedly 'rejected' demands of internal secession to form new states. In 2006, then-Prime Minister Meles Zenawi persuaded Sidama leaders to suspend their pursuit of a regional state after the Sidama zonal council voted for a referendum on statehood. After that, the Sidama's campaign largely lay dormant until 2018.

[XVIII] Following this, eleven additional claims for regional statehood were endorsed by various zonal councils in SNNPRS during 2018. According to deputy president Getahun. Sidama statehood would likely fuel agitation by the Dawro, Gamo, Gofa, Gurage, Hadiya, Kafficho, Kambatta, Wolayta and other groups for their own states).

[XIX] 'Ethiopia Holds Referendum to Determine Statehood for Sidama Zone' in *International Foundation for Electoral Systems*, 15 January 2020, available at <https://www.ifes.org/news/ethiopia-holds-referendum-determine-statehood-sidama-zone> (last accessed 2 May 2024).

[XX] 'Ethiopia Holds Referendum to Determine Statehood for Sidama Zone' in *International Foundation for Electoral*

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Systems, 15 January 2020, available at <https://www.ifes.org/news/ethiopia-holds-referendum-determine-statehood-sidama-zone> (last accessed 2 May 2024).

XXI As EPRDF's views on governance and statehood shifted, from the time of armed struggle to actually administering and running the country, so did their understanding on how to organise the ethnic heterogeneous southern part of the country. Originally sixteen different ethnic parties were established to administer the five states in the south at various administrative levels. As these parties were replicates of each other and initiated by EPRDF in order to obtain politico-administrative control of the southern people, it was decided to merge them into one unified multi-ethnic front in 1993, called Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Front (later renamed to 'movement' as in SEPDM).

XXII 'Ethiopia Holds Referendum to Determine Statehood for Sidama Zone' in *International Foundation for Electoral Systems*, 15 January 2020, available at <https://www.ifes.org/news/ethiopia-holds-referendum-determine-statehood-sidama-zone> (last accessed 2 May 2024).

XXIII See: 'Ethiopia postpones autonomy referendum for ethnic Sidama: Fana news agency' in *Reuters*, 15 October 2019, available at<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics/ethiopia-postpones-autonomy-referendum-for-ethnic- sidama-fana-news-agency-idUSKBN1WU2LJ> (last accessed 6 April 2024).

XXIV It is worth noting that many federations involve both the federal government and subnational councils in decision-making processes to varying degrees.

XXV Article 47 (3) (c) Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995.

XXVI Article 29, para. 2-8 in Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany, 1949.

XXVII Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation of 18 April 1999.

XXVIII For instance, the Gurage Zone embraces several different ethnicities, although the name of the Zone privileges one ethnic group. The Gurage Zone Comprises of representatives from three distinct ethnic groups, which approved the new state formation claim from the Gurage Zone. Meaning that the 3 ethnic groups voted in the statehood exercise in the zonal council.

XXIX There has been a high rate of urbanisation from rural Sidama to the city over the last years.

XXX 'Elections in Ethiopia: 2019 Sidama Referendum' in *International Foundation for Electoral Systems*, 19 November 2019, available at < https://www.ifes.org/tools-resources/faqs/elections-ethiopia-2019-sidama-referendum> (last accessed 20 April 2024).

XXXI See: 'Ethiopia referendum: Dozens killed in Sidama clashes' in *BBC*, 22 July 2019, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49070762 > (last accessed 6 April 2024).

XXXII See: 'Ethiopia referendum: Dozens killed in Sidama clashes' in *BBC*, 22 July 2019, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49070762 > (last accessed 6 April 2024).

XXXIII 'New multi-ethnic regional state emerging in South west' in *Borkena*, 10 October 2020, available at < https://borkena.com/2020/10/10/ethiopia-new-multi-ethnic-regional-state-emerging-in-south-west/> (last accessed 28 April 2024).

XXXIV The Southern Ethiopia Region constitutes Wolayta, Gamo, Gofa, South Omo, Gedeo and Konso zones– and special woredas – Derashe, Amaro, Burji, Basketo and Ale.

XXXV The Central Ethiopia Region constitutes Gurage, Siltie, Kambata Tambaro, Halaba, Hadia zones and Yem special district.

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