

ETHNICITY AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN AFRICA: THE CASE OF ETHNIC-BASED PARTIES¹ IN ETHIOPIA

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine how ethnicity affects political parties in Africa in general and in Ethiopia in particular. The paper attempts to investigate ethnic-based parties in Ethiopia in three successive administrations: the Imperial government (1930-1974), the Socialist Military government (*Derg*) (1974-1991), and the EPRDF-led Federal government (1991-present). In this paper, case studies of ethnic-based parties in the three successive Ethiopian regimes are included. Most of the earlier political and semi-political Ethiopian organizations were ethnic-based organizations secretly formed abroad by the support of the neighboring countries such as Somalia, Sudan, and some Arab countries. Ethiopia officially followed ethnic party system since 1991.

Key Words: Africa, Ethiopia, Ethnic party, Multi-ethnic party, Non-ethnic party, Particularistic party, Political Party.

¹ For the sake of convenience, I have decided to use the term “party” though various political groups in the country name themselves in various forms: “Organization,” “Front”, “Movement”, “Party”, etc.

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1. Introduction

Ethnicity is one of the controversial concepts in anthropology, and appeared in the English vocabulary in the 1950s (Anttonen n.d. 49-51). For social anthropologists ethnicity became a subject of discussion since the late 1960s (Eriksen 1993). It was David Riesman, the American sociologist, who used the term “ethnicity” for the first time in 1953 (Eriksen 1993). For Nnoli (1978: 6-8) ethnicity has four characteristics: it “*exists only with in a political society consisting of diverse ethnic groups*”; it “*is characterized by a common consciousness of being one in relation to other relevant groups*”; it “*tends to be exclusive.....Acceptance and rejection on linguistic.....cultural grounds characterizes social relations*”; and it “*is characterized by conflict.*” Ethnicity is a highly complex phenomenon. Ethnic groups give support (through belongingness) and solidarity to their members to counter balance the alienation prevalent in the modern world. On the other hand, ethnicity could be the basis for unequal treatment of people and it may be the cause of ethnocentrism and prejudices against members of other ethnic groups. Thus, it can create conflicts and wars (Paranjpe 1986:1). Furthermore, ethnicity as Horowitz (1993, 1998) and Young (1993: 1819) emphasized, plays an important role in the politics of many countries and it has an impact on democracy. According to Banerejee (2007:1), “*a strengthening of ethnic preferences increases polarization*”, and this is particularly true among low income countries (Alesina et al 1999).

There are two major theoretical “Schools” on nationalism and violence: primordialism and instrumentalism. According to primordialist theory, humans are subdivided into naturally demarcated communities (Gurr 1994). Primordialism regards ethnicity as something naturally inborn, fixed and stable. This view can be best explained by assessing how colonialists particularly indirect rule proponents regarded Africans during colonialism. The European colonialists and the early structural functionalist anthropologists viewed African society as a collection of tribes that are characterized by distinct cultural markers (Evans-Pritchard 1951). However, contrary to the colonialist claim recent anthropological studies disclosed that it was colonialist policy that “created” or rigidified the previous very loose ethnic identities making them fixed instead of flexible (Bayart 1993, Ranger 1983). Primordialism theory was dominant in the 19th century where it served as a rationale for the nationalist movements under the principle: “for every nation-one state.” In the 20th century, the applicability of “for every nation-one state” theory was challenged in two ways: First, many areas of the world are inhabited by mixed people. Second, different people define their nationality in different ways: for some language is the fundamental criterion, others consider race as the primary distinction between peoples, while religion and culture are perceived fundamental by others (Helland-Hansen 2007).

According to instrumentalism theory, on the other hand, individuals choose their identity rationally. Therefore, as described by Anderson (1983), Ellingsen

(2000: 203) and Gurr (1994: 348), in instrumentalist perspective communities are seen as either imagined or chosen and members' loyalties to the communities are determined by shared prospects, not shared qualities. At present, many social scientists conventionally view ethnicity as a constructed phenomenon.

This paper poses three important research questions:

(1) What is the relationship between ethnic identity and ethnic political organizations?

(2) What are the merits and demerits of ethnic-based political organizations?

(3) How did ethnic-based political parties play a very important role in shaping the socio-political atmosphere in Ethiopia?

2. Concepts and Definitions

For Gulliver (1969: 24) the term tribe meant "*an ethnic group, with additional invidious connotation of primitivism.*" Gulliver (1969: 24) defines tribe as "*any groups of people which is distinguished by its members and by others on the basis of cultural regional criteria.*" According to Sithole (1986: 51), it was the Romans who for the first time used the term "tribe" and the descriptive "barbarian" or "primitive" to refer the non-Romans in the ancient Roman Empire. Later on, when Europeans came to Africa as missionaries, anthropologists, travelers and colonialists, they employed the term "tribe" to denote "groups of clans under recognized chiefs" (Sithole 1986: 51). In contemporary Africa, as noted by Sithole (1986: 51), "tribalism" has nothing to do with "primitivism".

The term "ethnic" derives its origin from the Greek term "ethnos". "Ethnos", according to Wernhart (n.d. 70), signifies the unit of human beings who are united through common socio-cultural expressions. He further noted that "ethnos" could be perceived "*as a skeleton (frame) concept, whose range of variation reaches from the smallest local groups to tribes and peoples*" (Wernhart n.d.: 70). The term "ethnic" appeared in the English language in the mid 14th century. However, "ethnicity" is a relatively new term in the field of social sciences. The word "ethnic" has got various meanings through time. In its earliest usage it meant "heathers" or "pagans." In the 19th century it was associated with racial characteristics. In the USA, particularly, in the 20th century, it was used to denote those immigrants who had non-Northern or non-Western European descent (Eriksen 1993: 4; Green 2004). The term increased its importance in the social sciences particularly in the 1960s as anthropologists started to frequently employ it to describe African and other Third World countries (Eade 1996: 58; Green 2004). In "traditional" anthropology, the term "ethnic group" has the following characteristics: it is biologically self-perpetuating; it shares important cultural values; it makes up a field of communication and interaction; and it has members

who identify themselves or identified by others as constituting a category (Barth 1969: 10-11). In the African context, Nnoli (1978: 5) defined ethnic groups as: *“social formations distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries. The relevant factor may be language, culture, or both.”* At present, the two phrases (i.e. „ethnic group” and “tribe”) are used alternatively in many cases. But, still, the usage of “tribe” and “ethnic group” show distinct differences. Because, most of the time, even in developing countries the term “tribe” is used only to refer population groups in the rural areas, while “ethnic group” refers population groups in urban areas.

Various scholars have defined ethnic group in different ways. Cohen (1974:ix-x) operationally defined it as *“a collectivity of people who share some patterns of normative behaviour and; form a part of larger population interacting with people from other collectivities with in the framework of a social system.”* Farley, quoted in Cornell & Hartmann (1998: 17), defines an ethnic group as *“a group of people who are generally recognized by themselves and/or the others as a distinct group, with such recognition based on social or cultural characteristics.”*

Many people have difficulty in differentiating the meanings of “ethnic party”, “ethnic-based party”², from “multi-ethnic party,” and “non-ethnic party.” In fact, in many instances “ethnic- party” and “ethnic-based party” are used interchangeably. In his book entitled, “Ethiopia: competing ethnic nationalities and the quest for democracy 1960-2000”, Merera Gudina (2003) used the term “multi-ethnic party” to denote a party that recruit members irrespective of their ethnic origin. Merera divided political parties in Ethiopia simply in to two categories: “multi-ethnic party” and “ethnic-based party”. In Merera’s terminology an “ethnic-based party” is a party that is formed to serve particular ethnic group(s), and “multi-ethnic party” is a party that recruits its members irrespective of their ethnic affiliation.

In order to avoid the confusion regarding the meaning of the four important phrases (i.e., “ethnic-based party”, “ethnic party”, “multi-ethnic party” and “non-ethnic party”) I have decided to follow Kachan Chandra’s (2002, 2004, 2005) definitions, which are briefly explained in the following paragraphs. The distinction between ethnic parties and multi-ethnic parties is not easy to discern.³ According to Chandra (2004: 3), a party can be categorized as “ethnic”⁴, “multi-

² Many researchers employ the phrases “ethnically-based party” to denote “ethnic-based party”. In this paper I use both phrases interchangeably.

³ For Horowitz (1985: 299) for instance, an ethnic party can serve the interests of more than one ethnic group. He argues that a party should be termed multi-ethnic “only if it spans the major groups in conflict.”

⁴ Chandra (2004:3) defines an “ethnic party” as *“a party that overtly represents itself as a champion of the cause of one particular ethnic or set of categories to the exclusion of others, and that makes such a representation central to its strategy of mobilizing voters.”* Horowitz (1985), as cited by Norris & Matts (2003:3), defines “ethnic parties” as *“those*

ethnic”⁵ or” “non-ethnic”⁶ by examining the message it sends to the electorate during election campaigns and rallies and by studying its policies. But, we have to understand that “*a close look at any supposedly ‘single’ ethnic category would reveal that it is simultaneously an amalgam of others*” (Chandra 2004: 4). Therefore, a presumed “single ethnic group” might have subdivisions. In this case, “*the main distinction between an ethnic and a multiethnic party, therefore, lies not in the number of categories that each attempts to include, but in whether or not there is a category that each attempts to exclude*” (Chandra 2004:4). An “ethnic party” speaks for one ethnic category while “multi-ethnic party” speaks for many ethnic groups. But, an ethnic party excludes “others” (implicitly or explicitly) while a multi-ethnic party (although it invokes ethnic identities just like ethnic party) does not identify a clear outsider group (Chandra 2002: 6). Multi-ethnic party defers from an ethnic- party only in its inclusiveness (Chandra 2005: 7). A non-ethnic party “*does not make an ethnic appeal central to its mobilizing strategy*” (Chandra 2005: 7). Therefore, in this paper, when I say “ethnic-based parties”⁷ I am referring both the “ethnic-parties” and “multi-ethnic parties”.

3. Political Parties in Africa

There are two distinct phases of political party formation in Africa. The first wave of political party formation took place in the 1950s and 1960s when colonialism started to disintegrate (Wondwosen 2008a:1-14). The second wave of party formation in Africa occurred in the 1990s at the collapse of the so-called the Socialist World (Erdman 2007: 19). Most of the current African political parties are the results of the second phase. Therefore, they lack experience and a history of strong social base. In Ethiopia, almost 90% of the country’s political parties are created in the 1990s and almost 95 % of these newly created parties are ethnic-

that derive their support from an identifiable ethnic group and serve the interests of that group.” For Kantor (2006: 160-161) the concept of ethnic party is more or less identical with “minority party”, “national minority party” or “ethno-regional party”.

⁵ A “multi-ethnic party” is “*a party that also makes an appeal related to ethnicity central to its mobilizing strategy but that assumes a position of neutrality or equidistance toward all relevant categories on the salient dimension(s) of ethnicity*” (Chandra 2004: 3).

⁶ Non ethnic party is “a party that does not include and exclude categories mainly on the basis of ethnic identity, or that addresses ethnic demands but does not make such demands central to its political platform” (Chandra 2004: 3).

⁷ Horowitz (2000: 291) defines ethnically-based party as a party that “derives its support overwhelmingly from an identifiable ethnic group (or cluster of ethnic groups) and serves the interests of that group.” According to Horowitz (1985), Gunther and Diamond (2003) and Posner (2004), ethnically-dominated parties are the result of elite politicians who wanted to play the ethnic card in order to assume political power. On the other hand, for Bates (1974) and Ndegwa (1997) ethnic-dominated party systems could be the result of the high importance of ethnic identity in people’s lives who wanted political change due to poverty, inequality and urbanization.

based parties. It is also interesting to note that most of the non-ethnic Ethiopian parties are located in Europe and America due to the various pre-conditions imposed by the incumbent ethnic-based party, the EPRDF, one of which is the renunciation of armed struggle.

Erdman (2007: 23; 2004) divides ethnic-based political parties in Africa into two types: ethnic-party, and the ethnic congress party. For Erdman (2007: 23), an ethnic party is based on one ethnic group, while the ethnic congress party is based on several ethnic groups. Erdman (ibid) claimed that in most of African countries ethnic-parties are rare while the ethnic congress party is the most common. The fundamental reason for the existence of many ethnic congress parties in Africa is the presence of many small (numerically) ethnic groups that can not constitute a meaningful representation in parliament unless they form a coalition. In every African country (except Botswana, Namibia, Burundi, and Rwanda) there are many ethnic groups but none of them can claim majority status (Erdman 2007: 25). In the case of Ethiopia, there are around 82 ethnic groups but none of them can claim majority status. According to the 1994 census⁸, out of the total Ethiopian population of 53,130,782 the various ethnic groups comprise the following percentages: Oromo (32.1 %), Amhara (30.1 %), Tigraway (Tigre) (6.2 %), Somali (5.9 %), Gurage (4.3 %), Sidama (3.5 %), Welaita (2.4 %), others (15.4 %). Therefore, no single ethnic group can form a single majority government unless coalitions with other ethnic groups are formed.⁹

When colonialism started to disintegrate in Africa in the 1950s and 1960s (Wondwosen 2008a: 1-14), most of the newly independent countries preferred a single party system and condemned a multi-party system as an obstacle to national integration and development. The newly independent African countries considered a multi-party system unfit for multi-ethnic Africa. As Gentili (2005:4) highlighted, “*political plurality and ethnic diversity, as manipulated by colonial rule, were denounced as obstacles to nation building and national unity.*” That is why many African leaders tried to hinder the introduction of multi-party systems until recently.

When local and international situations forced Africa to open its door to multi-party system in the 1990s, another distinct problem appeared: the emergence of multitude of political parties dominated by one party. For Gentili (2005: 11), “*The numbers of parties that appeared with the opening to democratization is not a demonstration of increased participation, but rather of fragmentation and*

⁸ It is estimated that the total population of Ethiopia at present is more than 80 million. Few months ago in 2008, the second census in the history of the country was conducted. However, the results are not yet declared.

⁹ It is exactly due to this reason the TPLF (Tigray People’s Liberation Front) which stood for the Tigre ethnic group (6.2%) formed the EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democracy Party), a sort of coalition comprising other ethnic groups, but dominated by the TPLF.

therefore weakness of the party systems.” We can comfortably say that the electoral structures in Sub-Saharan Africa have contributed for the tendency of one-party dominance. As Mathisen (2002) noted African democracies are characterized by a dominant party system, and fragmented, and weak opposition parties. According to Gentilti (2005: 6), “*Democratization at the beginning of the ‘90’s was resisted in most countries by single party leaders, but hailed by the majority of the populations in another wave of ‘revolution of rising expectations.’*” Though Max Weber referred political parties as “the children of democracy” (Doherty 2001: 6), the existence of many weak opposition parties shows the fragmentation of African political parties. For instance, in Angola’s election, according to Deegan (2003), 126 political parties contested an election.

4. Ethnic-based Political Parties in Ethiopia: Past and Present

In this section, I will discuss the ethnic-based political organizations in Ethiopia in the three successive governments: Haile Selassie (1930-1974), the Derg (1974-1991), and the EPRDF (1991-Present).

4.1. The Reign of Haile Selassie I (1930-1974)

During the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie only very few political organizations (often illegal) emerged. Since political parties were not allowed to function in the country, opposition forces established political parties (mostly ethnic-based) in the neighboring countries¹⁰ According to DOS (1972), during the reign of Haile Selassie “*There are no political parties in Ethiopia, and the elected members of parliament are generally conservative property owners.*” As I stated elsewhere, there were underground ethnic-based political organizations in the Imperial period which were established abroad to wage a guerrilla war against the imperial government. These include: the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front), the ENLF (The Ethiopian National Liberation Front), and the SALF (The Somali Abo Liberation Front)¹¹. Sudan and Somalia were very active in supporting these ethnic-based political parties with the aim of weakening the Ethiopian central government. Arab and Islamic countries such as Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Algeria, Egypt, and Libya were also giving support to the ethnic-based political parties that conducted guerrilla warfare against the government of Haile Selassie (DOS 1970). The East-bloc countries mainly the Soviet Union, East Germany and Cuba were also important supporters of these Ethiopian dissident political groups (CIA 13 March 1969). Emperor Haile

¹⁰ The first political organization in the history of Ethiopia was the “Ethiopian People’s Council” (Andargachew 2000: 9). It was a non-ethnic organization.

¹¹ The *Somali Abo* was established in 1961. Its aim was annexing the Ogaden and Bale provinces of Ethiopia to the Republic of Somalia.

Selassie's government was also challenged by an attempted coup in 1960. One of the aims of the coup plotters was to allow the formation of political parties in the country (Time Europe 26 December 1960).

In the following paragraphs, I will briefly describe one of the major ethnic-based political parties that waged armed struggle against the Imperial government.

The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) ¹²

The biggest challenge to the Imperial government came from the ethnic-based organization, the ELF¹³. When Ethiopia made Eritrea a province in 1962 (Harden 30 May 1991) by changing its federal status, various insurgency movements, some Muslims, some Marxists emerged. One of the Muslim political organizations was the ELF. Eritrean Muslim activists living in exile established the

¹² It is also known as *Jabha* ("Front" in Arabic).

¹³ The ELF was an ethnic-based party that led an armed struggle for the secession of Eritrea from Ethiopia. Eritrea was part of Ethiopia and was known as *Bahre Negash* until the Italians occupied it in 1890 (Harden 30 May 1991). In the Second World War, Italy was defeated and Eritrea remained under the British mandate from 1941 to 1952 (Andargachew 1993: 7). At the end of Second World War, Italy lost all its legal rights (as a loser) to its colonies in the 1947 treaty. Therefore, in order to negotiate and decide on the question of former Italian colonies, a four power commission was set up involving Britain, France, the Soviet Union and the United States. On the issue concerning the future of Eritrea the four countries failed to reach an agreement, and every member of the commission offered different proposal. Accordingly, Britain's proposal was the partition of Eritrea along religion line where the western part would be united with Sudan, while the highlands and coastal areas to go to Ethiopia (Teferra 1997: 72). The United State favored a complete union of Eritrea with Ethiopia (Bundegaard 2004: 25). France opted for Trust Territory with Italian administration, while the Soviet Union it its turn supported a Trust Territory, but under international administration. Due to the failure of the four countries to reach a negotiated agreement, the matter was referred to the UN (Andargachew 1993: 7; Wondwosen 2008d). The UN established another commission of five members to study and proposed a solution. The members were: Burma, Guatemala, Norway, Pakistan and South Africa. Finally, the UN passed a Resolution 390A federating Eritrea with Ethiopia. Around the end of the British mandate, two political groups emerged in Eritrea, along religious line: the Moslem League representing the Moslem population (lowlanders) and the Unionist party representing the Christian (highlanders) population of Eritrea. When the UN fact finding mission arrived in Eritrea to determine the future of Eritrea, it became evident that the Moslem League inclined to the independence of Eritrea, while the Unionist Party supported Eritrea's union with Ethiopia. The UN also considered the 3rd option, that is, uniting the Christian dominated highland with Ethiopia, and the Moslem dominated lowland with Sudan. Finally, however, it was decided to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia (Andargachew 1993: 7). In 1950, the UN decided that Eritrea would be part of Ethiopia (as of 1952) as a federal province with its own separate constitution and elected government. From 1952 to 1962 Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia. However, in 1962 Haile Selassie managed to annul the federation and Eritrea became a province of Ethiopia.

ELF in 1961 under the leadership of Hamid Idris Awate (Bahru 2002: 219)¹⁴ Few years earlier, its forerunner, the ELM (Eritrean Liberation Movement) was created in Cairo in 1958 under the leadership of Hamid Idris Awate. After the neutralization of the ELM, another faction, known as the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front) was formed. The ELF fought for the independence of Eritrea arguing that Eritrea was a Moslem (Arab) Nation. The ELF which was created by very few self-exiled Eritreans became very active by 1966 in the western and coastal areas of Eritrea which were low lands and barren lands. After the Middle East war in 1967, it lost its Arab support temporarily, but in 1969 it re-emerged again as an active guerrilla force in Eritrea. During the reign of Haile Selassie it unleashed various terrorist acts such as attacking water and electric power installations, raiding rail and road traffic in Eritrean province, kidnapping foreigners in Eritrea, highjacking Ethiopian planes etc. The ELF was supported by Arab and Muslim countries such as Libya, Iraq, Syria, Sudan and communist countries mainly China, Cuba, the Soviet Union and organizations such as PLO. The support of Arab countries and communist countries involved financial support, military training, propaganda support, supplying arms (Weapons) and ammunitions, and giving bases (Sudan) to serve as a launching pad (Catlin 1993: 12-13; DOS 1970). Around 1967 the ELF managed to get peasants' support in Eritrea particularly around Massawa port and in the Northern and Western part of Eritrea. The ELF suffered internal divisions particularly when its regional commanders began quarreling over strategy and tactics. Later on, the ELF's hostility and suspicion against the Christian Eritreans forced some Christian guerrillas to establish their own political organization, known as the EPLF (Eritrean People Liberation Front), a Marxist pro-independence organization.

4.2. The Derg Government (1974-1991)

During the Derg's rule all ethnic parties, multi-ethnic parties, and non-ethnic parties were persecuted. The Derg government outlawed all political parties, and established its own party, the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE) and made the country a single party state. In fact, long before the establishment of the WPE in 1984, there were few non ethnic political parties and organisations that were created in the early years of the revolution in the 1970s, but soon they were either banned when they challenged the *Derg's* political domination or disbanded when they outlived their usefulness. These non-ethnic political organizations were: the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party (EPRP), established in 1972; "*Melaw*

¹⁴ Various sources put the establishment of ELF in different years. For instance, according to Keller (2004: 25), the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) was established in Cairo in 1960 by mostly Muslim exile Eritreans from the rural western lowland area of Eritrea. Bundegaard (2004: 30) also supported Keller in maintaining that the ELF was created in 1960. On the other hand, for Clapham (2000), the ELF started armed opposition in 1961.

Ethiopia Socialist Niknake” or the “All Ethiopian Socialist Movement” (*MEISON*) established in 1968; the Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Organization (MLRO) (its Amharic acronym was *Malerid*); the Workers’ League (WL) (its Amharic acronym, “*Wez lig*”); “*Echat*”, and “*Abyotawi Seded*”.

The Marxist military government (*Derg*) theoretically accepted the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the right to self-determination of all ethnic groups or nationalities in the country. However, it did not implement this theory in to practice, and hence Ethiopia remained a centralized state. As the result, ethnic – based parties such as EPLF (Eritrean People’s Libsration Front), and TPLF (Tigray People’s Liberation Front), OLF (Oromo Liberation Front), WSLF (Western Somali Liberation Front), flared up in the country particularly in the areas inhabited by the Eritreans, Tigreans, Oromos, and Somalis (Van der Beken 2003: 4).

In the following section I will briefly describe the EPLF and the TPLF that led a successful armed struggle against the military government of Ethiopia.

The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF)¹⁵

The EPLF was a multi-ethnic organization. According to Clapham (2000: 10), the EPLF was created in 1973¹⁶ by the Eritrean Christian guerrilla fighters who were dissatisfied with the ELF’s policies. As I stated before, the ELF had internal problems largely between Christians and Moslems, socialists and nationalists, and between rural and urban elements. These internal divisions and the failure of the ELF’s leadership to address the problem led to the withdrawal of a portion of the combatants. It was in this manner Osman Salah Sabbe separated himself from the ELF and established the Popular Liberation Forces (PLF) that later on led to the formation of the EPLF after merging with other two groups: Eritrean Liberation Forces at Barka area, and the *salfi nasenet*, a group that separated itself from the ELF in Akale Guzay area (in Eritrea) which was led by Isayyas Afeworki (Bahru 2002: 220). A bitter war between the ELF and the EPLF ensued and culminated with the victory of the EPLF in 1981, and the expulsion of the ELF from the Eritrean soil (Plaut and Gilkes 1999). From all Eritrean political organizations, the EPLF was the most successful in its struggle that culminated in the secession of Eritrea from Ethiopia in 1991. Though established by Christians, the EPLF was a secular organization “*that adopted a Marxist ideology of liberation of war in order to bridge over the ethnic and religious divide*” (Clapham 2000: 10). In 1993, a referendum was conducted and Eritrea became an independent country.

¹⁵ Its more popular name is *Shaabiya* (“popular” in Arabic).

¹⁶ Bahru (2002: 220) also claims that it was established in 1973. However, according to Merera (2003: 168), the EPLF was established around 1972.

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)

According to Aregawi (2004: 569), one of the founders of the TPLF, the TPLF was founded in 1975 by a small band of ethnic Tigres. The aim of this small guerrilla band in Tigray¹⁷ was the creation of an independent republic of Tigray (according to its 1976 manifesto). But, later on, this aim was dropped and replaced with achieving cultural and political autonomy within a united Ethiopia¹⁸ (Aalen 2002: 6). From 1975 to 1989, the TPLF combatants conducted a hit-and-run tactics and later on waged a conventional war against the Derg government. The Derg lost all of Tigray province after its defeat by the TPLF in 1989. In 1987, (i.e. two years before expelling the Derg army from Tigray region) the TPLF and other allied groups formed the EPRDF and started to fight not only for the self-determination of Tigray, but for the removal of the Derg government from Addis Ababa. According to Merera, (2003: 86-87), the TPLF created the EPRDF by involving the following political groups:

(1) EPDM (The Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement). This political group was composed of EPRP defectors.

(2) EDORM (The Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement), which was composed war prisoners who were captured by the TPLF in its fight against the Derg soldiers.

(3) OPDO (The Oromo People's Democratic Organization), which comprised former Oromo soldiers of the Derg army who were captured by the TPLF.

(4) Later on, another organization, the SEPDM (the South Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Movement) was created representing the Southern peoples and became a coalition member of the EPRDF¹⁹.

In 1991, the EPRDF was able to militarily oust the Derg regime from Addis Ababa and the rest of the country and formed its government in Addis Ababa.

¹⁷ Plaut and Gilkes (1999) claim that "The TPLF activities were an attempt to end Amhara rule. In Tigrayan eyes the Amhara had usurped the traditional power base of Ethiopian society, and transferred it from the ancient Tigrayan capital of Axum to Addis Ababa."

¹⁸ In this case we can say that it started as an ethno-nationalist movement with the aim of getting self-determination of Tigray. But, later on, it expanded to other regions by forming the EPRDF in 1987 with other political groups. For further information, see EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front) <<http://eprdforgans.org/>> (Retrieved on 16 April 2006).

¹⁹ The SEPDM was formed after the EPRDF combatants occupied Addis Ababa in 1991.

4.3. The EPRDF Government (1991-Present)

According to Keller (2002: 21), “until, 1991,..... successive regimes either tried to suppress the unique cultural identities of more than eighty distinct ethno-linguistic groups and, at the same time, to assimilate them into the dominant Amhara culture.” Keller (2002: 22) claims that ethnic-based umbrella organization, the EPRDF, as soon as assuming political power in 1991 “decided not to suppress the national aspirations of Ethiopia’s grieving ethnic groups but, instead, to allow them the full expression of their languages and cultures”. It also reorganized the country’s administrative structure in to largely ethnically-based regional states (Keller 2002:22; Wondwosen 2008c). After 1991 a number of ethnic-based political parties mushroomed in Ethiopia. The EPRDF, as an ethnic-based party, encouraged the formation of political parties along ethnic lines and tacitly discouraged non-ethnic parties or other pan-Ethiopian parties. The government’s policy of ethnic federalism created an ample situation for the establishment of ethnic-based parties at the expense of the pan-Ethiopian and non-ethnic parties.

Elections and Political parties in the post-1991 Ethiopia

In all of the federal and regional parliamentary elections (1995, 2000, 2005) in Ethiopia the “winners”²⁰ were: ethnic-based parties, particularly the EPRDF. In the 1995 Ethiopian elections for the federal and regional parliaments, the EPRDF was declared a winner in a landslide victory. It won 483 of the 537 seats in the Council of Peoples’ Representatives. Merera (2003: 135) notes that the EPRDF won 90.1% of the seats in the election. The TPLF-EPRDF won all the seats in the state assembly and all the state’s seats in Council of People’ Representatives. All the 92 local assembly seats in Addis Ababa were won by the EPRDF. The largest opposition party that participated in the 1995 election, the Ethiopian National Democratic Movement (ENDM),²¹ contested for 80 seats but failed even to win a single seat.

In the 2000 election, the EPRDF and its junior allies won the majority- in fact, they won more than 90% of the seats in the federal parliament. According to Van der Beken (2003: 7-15), the member parties of the EPRDF: Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) won all 152 seats in the regional parliament; the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) won 286 seats out of 294 seats in the

²⁰ As declared by many international election observers (Wondwosen 2008b), the election results particularly the 2005 election results were highly questionable. Therefore, when I say the “winners” of the election, I am simply taking the official declaration by the NEBE (National Electoral Board of Ethiopia) which has been always accused of favouring the EPRDF party.

²¹ “Ethiopia Assessment” (April 2002): United Kingdom, Country Information & Policy Unit, Immigration & Nationality Directorate, Home Office.

Amhara regional parliament; the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO) won 535 seats out of the 537 seats in the Oromia regional parliament; the Southern Nation, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) won 323 seats out of 346 seats of the regional parliament. In the other five regions, as reported by Van der Beken (2003: 7-15), the satellite political parties of the EPRDF's won majority votes in their respective regional parliaments. These were: The Afar National Democratic Party, that won 84 seats out of the 87 seats in the Afar regional council (parliament); the Benishangul / Gumuz Peoples' Democratic Unity Front won 71 seats out of the 80 seats in the Benishangul / Gumuz regional parliament; the Gambela Peoples Democratic Front won 40 of the 53 seats in the Gambela regional parliament. Similarly, in Somali Region, and Harar City the satellite parties of the EPRDF won the majority vote. The EPRDF also won 520 seats in the 547 seat federal parliament in the May 2000 election. Opposition parties also managed to win 13 seats both in the federal and regional parliaments (WIC 27 June 2000). According to Merera (2003: 135), in the May 2000 election opposition parties, namely AAPO (All Amhara People Organization), CAFPDE (Council of Alternative Forces for Peace and Democracy), EDP (Ethiopian Democratic Party), ONC (Oromo National Congress) and SEPDC (Southern Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Coalition) were able to win only 13 seats.

In the 2005 parliamentary election, which was marred by electoral disputes ethnic-based parties were the declared "winners". Ethnic-based parties that won seats in the parliament (House of People's Representatives) in the 2005 parliamentary election were²²: Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF) (38 seats), Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) (87 seats), Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO) (110 seats), Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement (SEPDM) (92 seats), Somali Peoples Democratic Party (SPDP) (24 seats), Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) (11 seats), Benshangul -Gumuz Peoples Democratic Unity Front (BGPDUF) (8 seats), Afar National Democratic Party (ANDP) (8 seats) Argoba National Democratic Organization (ANDO) (1 seats), Gambela Peoples Democratic Movement (GPDM) (3 seats), Harrari National League (HNL) (1 seat), Shecko Mejenger Peoples Democratic Unity Organization (SMPDUO) (1 seat). All in all, ethnic-based parties held 384 seats (73%) while non-ethnic parties won 142 seats (27%).²³

In the following section, I will give an overview of one of the most important ethnic-parties that are formed in the post 1991 period: the Oromo National Congress.

²² The number of the House of People's Representatives is stated here as 562 excluding 20 parliamentary seats who decided not take up their seats.

²³ Ethiopian Parliament, "Political parties and their Seats in the Third Tenure of the House of Peoples' Representatives (2005-2009)" < <http://www.ethiopar.net/type/English/hopre/pose.pdf> > (Retrieved on 8 September 2008).

The Oromo National Congress (ONC)

The ONC was established in 1996 as an ethnic party. The ONC's policy is based on rejecting the secessionist policies of some Oromo political groups such as the OLF, and opposing the dependency policy followed by the pro-TPLF Oromo party, the OPDO. By rejecting both secession and servitude, the ONC proposed a third alternative (Merera 2003: 198). In the 2005 parliamentary election, the ONC joined with other political parties to form a coalition known as the United Ethiopia Democratic Front (UEDF)²⁴. The UEDF was the 2nd most successful opposition party coalition in the 2005 election, and the ONC candidates who run under the UEDF won many parliamentary seats in Oromia region. Soon, under the machination and instigation of the ruling EPRDF party few ONC members rebelled against the party chairman, Dr. Merera Gudina. The rift and the conflict that broke out among the ranks of the Oromo National Congress (ONC) resulted in the forceful occupation of the ONC office in Addis Ababa by disgruntled members. The ONC leadership led by Dr. Merera Gudina accused the splinter group as agents of the ruling OPDO/EPRDF, while the splinter group accused the leadership as instrument of Chauvinist groups, and working against the interest of the Oromo people. The splinter group wanted the ONC to join the parliament, and distance itself from the UEDF (The Reporter 10 September 2005). After a long and protracted court process the chairman of the ONC, Merera Gudina, and most of the party members formed another Oromo party called "Oromo Peoples Congress". After departure of Dr. Merera Gudina and his supporters, the renegades fully controlled the ONC.

5. Discussion

After analyzing the definitions of ethnic-based parties given by Horowitz (1985: 291-292) and Scarritt ²⁵(2006: 237), Cheesman and Ford (2007: 22)

²⁴ Fifteen political parties and groups held a conference (All-Party Conference-APC) of Ethiopian opposition parties in USA from July 26 to August 1, 2003 and formed UEDF. These were: (1) Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF) (2) All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP) (3) All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (MEISON) (4) Council of Alternative Forces for Peace and Democracy (CAFPDE) (5) Ethiopian Democratic Union - Tehadiso (EDU *Tehadiso*) (6). Ethiopian *Medhin* Democratic Party (MEDHIN) (7) Ethiopian National United Front (ENUF) (8) Ethiopian People Federal Democratic Unity Party (HIBREHIZB) (9) Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) (10) Gambella People's United Democratic Front (11) Oromo National Congress (ONC) (12) Oromo People's Liberation Organization (OPLO - IBSO) (13) Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Coalition (SEPDC) (14) Tigrean Alliance for Democracy (TAND) (15) Ethiopian Union Democratic Party (EDUP).

²⁵ They defined ethnically based party as one that "derives its support overwhelmingly from an identifiable ethnic group (or cluster of groups) and serves the interests of that group" (Cheesman and Ford: 2007: 20).

classified political parties into five categories:²⁶ Non-ethnic party, multi-ethnic party with no majority ethnic group, multi-ethnic party with majority ethnic group, potentially ethnic party, and ethnic party. Classification of parties as “ethnic party”, “multi-ethnic party,” and “non-ethnic party” is not static but a time-bound. That is to say, an “ethnic party” that campaigned for a certain ethnic group in one election, may transform itself into a multi-ethnic or non-ethnic party in another election (Chandra 2002: 6).²⁷ However, according to Horowitz (2000: 293), transforming an originally ethnic party in to a multi-ethnic party is difficult since there is a high risk of loosing the support of co-ethnics.²⁸

At present, both in established democracies and emerging democracies ethnic-based parties are expanding. In many Western countries that have more homogenous society ethnic parties are rare. But, in Canada and other heterogeneous European countries (e.x. Belgium, Macedonia, Spain, and United Kingdom), in Asia (E.x. India, Russia, Srilanka), and in the Middle East (e.g. Israel) we find ethnic parties (Alonso 2005, Chandra 2004: 1). According to Cheeseman and Ford (2007:23), in Africa between 2001 and 2006 the number of ethnic parties decreased while the number of non-ethnic parties increased. Moreover, Cheeseman and Ford (2007) revealed that the proportion of ethnic ruling parties dropped from 40% in 2001 to 30% in 2003 and to 20% in 2006. On the other hand between 2003 and 2006 the proportion of ethnic opposition parties increased. In rich countries ethnic parties are less dominant (Banerejee and Pande 2007: 6). It is generally believed that when societies develop and the economy shifts from agriculture towards heavy industry and then service economy, traditional social identities would be eroded. In other words, as argued by Crewe and Denver (1985), Dalton et al (1984), and Norris (2003) high literacy rate, geographic mobility, societal modernization, access to the news media would loosen the grip of ethnicity in developing countries. Hence, “*Better-educated and more cognitively sophisticated citizens...have less need to rely upon the traditional social cues of ethnicity in electoral choices*” (Norris & Mattes (2003:5).

²⁶ They based their analysis on the survey of Afro barometer conducted in 18 African countries; Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia, Benin, Madagascar, Tanzania, Cape Verde, Zimbabwe, Lesotho.

²⁷ For instance, in Ethiopia, the AAPO (All Amhara People’s Organization) from 1992 to 2002 was an ethnic party. But in 2002, it transformed itself in to a non-ethnic party and renamed it self “AEUP” (All Ethiopia Unity Party). Therefore, in the 2005 election it ran as a non-ethnic party.

²⁸ However, this is not always true. For instance, the AAPO retained its co-ethnic supporters (Amharas) despite its transformation from ethnic party to non-ethnic party as manifested in the 2005 parliamentary election where the AEUP candidates won many seats for both the federal and regional parliament in the Amhara region.

In countries which are dominated by ethnic party competitions ethnic parties which represent the largest ethnic group have an electoral advantage²⁹ (Banerejee and Pande 2007:2, Chandra 2004). According to Gunther and Diamond (2001: 23), “*the principal goal of the ethnic party is not any universalistic program or platform, but rather to secure material, cultural, and political benefits and protections for the ethnic group in its competition with other groups*”. Moreover, the major aim of ethnic party, as argued by Gunther and Diamond (2001: 23), is “*to harden and mobilize its ethnic base with exclusive, often polarizing appeals to ethnic group opportunity and threat, electoral mobilization is not intended to attract additional sectors of society to support it*”. The objectives of the policies of ethnic parties, almost at all times, are the preservation of the culture and the promotion of the interests of their co-ethnics. In order to achieve these, ethnic parties are established at the state level (Kantor 2006: 160-161).

Though ethnic party is usually presumed to be detrimental to democratic stability in the so-called “patronage-democracies,”³⁰ it usually survives and flourishes, but only in two conditions: “*when it has competitive rules for intraparty advancement and when the size of the ethnic group(s) it seeks to mobilize exceeds the threshold of winning or leverage imposed by the electoral system*” (Chandra 2004: 1). According to Chandra (2002:1-2), ethnic parties are more stable than multi-ethnic parties and non-ethnic parties since the elites that hold the leadership of the party belong to the same ethnic group. Law (2005: 52-53) argues that “*the formation of one ethnic party is likely to produce a chain reaction that leads to the formation of an ethnic political party system.*” That it to say, theoretically speaking the transformation of one party into an ethnic party would also accelerate similar transformation of other parties. This is because once a party turns into an ethnic party it snatches voters (co-ethnics) away from the other non-ethnic parties.

²⁹ Dowd and Driessen (2008: 2) emphasize that “*in ethnically dominated party systems, parties are not distinguished from each other based on what they represent but rather who they represent.*”

³⁰ For Chandra (2004: 1) “patronage-democracies” are democracies where voters “*choose between parties by conducting ethnic head counts rather than by comparing policy platforms or ideological positions. They formulate preferences across parties by counting the heads of co-ethnics across party personnel, preferring that party that provides greatest representation to their co-ethnics*”.

Chandra (2004: 6) further stated that “patronage democracy” is “*a democracy in which the state monopolizes access to jobs and services, and in which elected officials have discretion in the implementation of laws allocating the jobs and services at the disposal of the state. The key aspect of a patronage-democracy is not simply the size of the state but the power of elected officials to distribute the vast resources controlled by the state to voters on an individualized basis, by exercising their discretion in the implementation of state policy.*”

Kantor (2006: 160) indicated that in societies that are structured along ethnic or national cleavages ethnic parties are formed. Countries that are ethnically diverse and low income tend to be organized along ethnic lines (Chua 2003; Horowitz 1985; Law 2005: 47; Posner 2005). The chances for ethnic parties to get electoral vote from non-members (i.e. members of ethnic groups) is very slim. Therefore, their existence depends on the vote and support they receive from their own co-ethnics³¹. In ethnic-based party systems “*those voters who crossed ethnic-party lines were subject, not just to the usual group pressures, but also to actual intimidation and even physical violence,*” say Norris and Mattes (2003: 5) based on their studies conducted in Ghana, Trinidad and Guyana.

According to Banerejee and Pande (2007: 7), most of the time, ethnic political parties easily succeed in getting the support of their ethnic groups. This is because a voter favors his own ethnic group “*for historical, social or symbolic reasons*”. In ethnically diverse countries, ethnic parties get higher advantages over other parties during election due to the following factors: (1) The voters will be instinctively pulled towards their co-ethnics (Shils 1957; Huntington 1996) (2) A shared language (common language) and social network facilitates political organization along ethnic lines (Bates 1983; Fearon and Laitin 1996) (3) It is much easier to target patronage along ethnic lines (Chandra 2004; Glaeser and Goldin 1995) (4) It is easy for ethnic party to dominate an election and political power in its ethnic constituency since other political parties get very less chance in the constituency (Fearon 1999, Caselli and Coleman 2005).

Many scholars (Horowitz 1985, Lijphart 1977, Rabushka and Shepsle 1972) have indicated that ethnic parties and the politicization of ethnic differences create instability and are assumed to be a major threat. Party systems where ethnically based parties dominate “*are prone to conflict, exacerbating existing ethnic divisions...because holding the reins of power in state office is often seen as a zero-sum game, rather than a process of accommodation*” (Norris and Matts 2003:3, citing Donald Horowitz). This theory is strongly advocated by Horowitz (2000: 294) and Wolf (2002). Other works (Deegan 2003: 2; Nikiwane 2000) also consider ethnic divisions as one of the causes for the weaknesses of political parties in Africa. By using South Africa as a case study Nikiwane (2000) said, “*The biggest weakness of these opposition parties is that they are regional, at best, and tribal in orientation. Their only hope was to unify their organizations. But because*

³¹ Although this might be generally true, in some cases in Ethiopia it is different. In many countries that are ethnically diverse the dependence of opposition parties on ethnicity is increasing and this trend might help them in getting electoral votes along ethnic lines. However, in Ethiopia, as manifested in the 2005 election, non-ethnic opposition parties such as the CUD got high electorate vote. In Addis Ababa, for instance, where the society is highly diverse, the CUD won almost 100% of the electoral vote. Even in the city quarters such as Teklehaymanot locality where the Tigreans, the co-ethnics of the incumbent party reside, the CUD got a resounding electoral victory.

of their fundamental structures (parochialism), they have consistently been unable to come together, let alone to agree on unified positions." Deegan (2003: 2) also described the problems and weaknesses of African political systems as follows: *"Often parties had no constituencies or were ethnic-based; equally, political programmes, interaction with the populace and financial transparency were non-existent, Internal party democracy was often unknown and many opposition parties actually disbanded between elections."* Kaufmann and Conversi (n.d.) argue the emergence of ethnic party systems in divided societies due to democratization usually leads countries into inter-state conflict and intense ethnic divisions. To sum up, ethnic party system usually leads a country to three directions: military regime, one-party authoritarian regime, or the establishment of multi-ethnic parties and coalitions (Law 2005: 59).

On the other hand, there are few scholars who attempted to justify the need for ethnic parties in Africa due to various compelling reasons. For instance, for Walraven (2000) ethno-regional groupings are the logical strategies for political parties to challenge incumbent parties in Africa. It is argued that the lack of class divisions and the absence or the weakness of strong civil society³² led African political parties to be established along ethnic lines. Another scholar, Lawson (1999: 12), also argued, *"In the absence of formal associations clearly apart from the state and capable of engaging the population, the introduction of liberal democratic procedures, at the behest of external donors, had led political parties to appeal to the only available alternative: ethnic identity."*

In many countries in the post-colonial Africa, as indicated by Basedau et al (2007), particularistic parties³³ are officially banned. Basedau et al (2007: 617) noted that in many contemporary African democracies ethnic, religious and regional parties are illegal. In fact, this is not unique to African countries. In many post-communist countries in Eastern Europe, and Asian countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey and Algeria ethnic and religious parties are banned (Basedau et al 2007: 618). These bans on ethnic parties in many African countries are due to various reasons. The most important reason is to avoid ethnic conflicts and wars.

³² Civil societies in Africa have many weaknesses that limited their participation in the democratization process. These are: firstly, they lack internal democracy, i.e. their own members are not socialized with democratic principles let alone democratizing the government. They, therefore, lack credibility. Secondly, they are heavily dependent on foreign donors. Therefore, they are vulnerable to be labeled as agents of foreign governments and groups. This dependence also forced them to be disassociated with the local condition. Usually, they are found attempting to form their CSOs as a replica of CSOs in donor countries (DPMF December 2002: 22-29). Recently, the EPRDF government of Ethiopia has drafted a new law that bans international CSOs from engaging in advocacy for democracy, governance, or peace-building work (VOA 01 July 2008).

³³ Instead of using "ethnic party" in a narrow sense, Almond and Coleman (1960) used a generic term, "Particularistic parties" to denote parties "having an ethnic, racial or tribal basis".

According to Bogaards (2008: 6), the ban of ethnic party is usually a form of political engineering aimed at ethnic conflict prevention and management. Perhaps, the first nation in Africa that banned particularistic parties was Ghana. Kwame Nikurmah, the first leader of independent Ghana, passed a law banning such parties in the 1960s. In contemporary Africa, twenty-two African countries have laws directly or indirectly banning particularistic parties³⁴. Sometimes, African leaders who come from minority ethnic group ban the formation of ethnic-based parties fearing that the leaders of the major ethnic groups can easily snatch political power. The best example here is Kenya, where the long time president, Daniel Arap Moi, belongs to a minority tribe or ethnic group (Basedau et al 2007: 618).

Horowitz (1991, 1985) argues that in countries where ethnic-based parties dominate the quality of democracy is likely to suffer. This assumption, according to Chandra (2002: 23), is based on the concept of the so-called “out bidding effect” concept. This concept (i.e. “ethnic outbidding”) states that the rise of ethnic party, which is always the result of ethnic divisions “infects” the political system, destroys competitive politics, and threatens the survival of democratic institutions. For Sisk (1996) ethnically-dominated party system lowers the quality of democracy because it limits peoples’ electoral choices only to the members of a particular ethnic group. Ethnic-dominated party systems also decrease the quality of democracy because in such system politicians are focused more on the interests of their respective ethnic groups at the expense of the country’s interest. As Posner (2004) notes, elites struggle to win the maximum rights and privileges for their ethnic groups³⁵. This condition fuels ethnic competition with the hope of gaining influence in national politics (Wantchekon 2003). On the other hand, for Chandra (2004, 2006) the quality of democracy will not be affected by the domination of ethnic-based parties. Another scholar, Birnir (2007) also voiced similar argument and claimed that ethnic-based parties might contribute for the improvement of the quality of democracy.

³⁴ These are: Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Mauritania, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Togo (Basedu 2007: 630). On the other hand, the only contemporary African country that officially and enthusiastically encouraged ethnic-based parties is Ethiopia.

³⁵ As manifested in the 2005 election, one of the campaign issues for the opposition parties in Ethiopia is the lopsided socio-economic policy of the TPLF-EPRDF government, which favoured the Tigray region at the expense of the other regions. They argued that though Ethiopia started multi-party democracy in 1991, the democratization process in the country suffered a heavy blow largely due to the political leaders’ obsession to enrich only their own ethnic group. The government, on the other hand, argue that the emphasis given to Tigray is not due to ethnicity, but to reconstruct the economy of the region, which was greatly damaged during the civil war that engulfed Tigray from 1975 to 1991. Anyways, the issue is still one of the most controversial issues that gripped the country at present.

In Ethiopia, ethnic-based party system became the official policy of the government in the post-1991 period. After taking political power by militarily overthrowing the Marxist military government of Ethiopia (Derg) in May 1991, the EPRDF adopted a federal structure along language and ethnic lines. Article 1 of the 1994 Ethiopian Constitution says, “*This constitution establishes a federal and democratic state structure*” (FDRE 1994). According to the Constitution, the duties and responsibilities of the federal government include: foreign relations, national defense, inter-state commerce, currency, immigration, communication, inter-state water resources (Article 51). The regional states draft their own constitutions, administer land and other natural resources, levy taxes and duties on revenue sources reserved for the states, enact civil service laws, and establish state police (Article 52). Therefore, the post 1991 political atmosphere has never been favorable to non-ethnic parties as manifested in the mushrooming of ethnic-based parties in the country. The EPRDF government (directly or indirectly) encouraged the formation of ethnic-based parties while at the same time discouraged the formation of non ethnic parties that attempted to recruit members irrespective of their ethnic origins. Moreover, although the EPRDF government is forced to allow non-ethnic parties to be formed due to the local and international pressure, still the government is busy in creating obstacles to the non-ethnic parties.³⁶ Therefore, at present, there are only very few non-ethnic parties in the country that aim to unite all Ethiopians under their pan-Ethiopia umbrella³⁷. It is ironic that in many African countries governments exert maximum effort to encourage the formation of non-ethnic parties, but in Ethiopia the reverse is true. Ethnic-based political parties are encouraged by the government at the expense of non-ethnic parties. In fact, as rightly noted by Merera (2003) the defeat of the Derg (1974-1991) by ethnic-based parties such as the TPLF-EPRDF, ONLF and OLF was a blow to the non-ethnic parties such as the EPRP (Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party), EDU (Ethiopian Democratic Union) and other pan-Ethiopian political parties. Furthermore, the TPLF-EPRDF-dominated government harassed and persecuted those non-ethnic parties particularly the ones that have potential to unite the people irrespective of their ethnic origin. Individuals and groups who were identified with the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE) were not allowed to participate in the country’s politics legally in the early years of the 1990s (Harbeson 1996). Moreover, those political organizations that refused to renounce armed struggle are

³⁶ The EPRDF government has been attempting to weaken the opposition parties (particularly non-ethnic parties) in various ways. These include: encouraging dissent among their ranks; harassing, intimidating and imprisoning opposition leaders and members; etc. Moreover, by manipulating the courts and the NEBE (National Electoral Board of Ethiopia) the ruling party has weakened the opposition parties.

³⁷ Many non-ethnic parties such as EPRP and MEISON are excluded from the country’s political scene by the ruling party, the EPRDF (Merera 2003: 87-88, 161). The principal precondition to participate in the Ethiopian political scene, according to the EPRDF, is renouncing armed struggle to remove the government by force.

banned. Therefore, EPRP, the “All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement” (i.e., *MEISON*) and other similar political groups were not allowed to participate in the Ethiopian politics. As Merera (2003: 88) indicated the non-ethnic political organizations such as the EPRP, which have been strong rivals of the TPLF since 1970s are sidelined in order to frustrate their mobilizing capacity.

In the post-election period in 2005, the CUD (Coalition for Unity and Democracy), the most influential and successful non-ethnic opposition party, was directly and indirectly persecuted by the government. The cadres of the TPLF-dominated government branded the CUD as a party supported only by the chauvinist Amhara people (BBC 23 July 2007) who fight for Amhara supremacy (Abbink 2006: 173-179) though the leadership and the membership of the CUD party showed heavy ethnic diversity³⁸. When the propaganda campaign that was aimed to mobilize other ethnic groups against the CUD failed, the government brought the CUD officials to the courts³⁹. Most of the CUD leaders were sentenced for life imprisonment on charges of genocide and treason.⁴⁰ Finally, however, due to the international outcry and domestic pressure, they were given “clemency.”

6. Conclusion

In Africa (Posner 2007, Norris and Mattes 2003) and in many Asian countries such as Malaysia, Srilanka and India (Brown 1996, Horowitz 1985, Chandra 2004), parties representing the dominant ethnic groups get electoral advantages. Ethnic parties usually garner support from their ethnic constituencies in two ways: First, by promising or giving material gains, i.e. giving hope for land, job, markets etc., to their ethnic constituencies. The second one is “psychological”

³⁸ There are two major misconceptions regarding the CUD. As reported by the BBC (23 July 2007) there is an assumption that the CUD’s major supporters were the Amhara people. Though it is true that the CUD got important electoral victory in the Amhara region, its strong base was Addis Ababa, the capital city, whose residents are ethnically diverse. In Addis Ababa, the CUD got almost 100 % electoral victory. Secondly, as pointed out by Abbink (2006: 173-179), it was wrongly assumed that the CUD was largely supported by the so-called “chauvinist” Amhara elements. In reality, however, CUD’s support came from various population groups and regions, but mainly from Addis Ababa, SNNP (Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples), and Amhara regions.

³⁹ Many people in Ethiopia believe that the courts are kangaroo courts which are filled by puppet judges who usually are the graduates of the EPRDF-controlled Civil Service College. In the last 17 years, the country has witnessed a spate of political show trials staged against opposition leaders, civil society leaders, and journalists of the independent media.

⁴⁰ In the current Ethiopia, as clearly manifested in the post-2005 election period, “genocide” and „treason“ charges against opposition parties, civil society leaders, and journalists of the independent media have become the major tools of the government to squash dissident voices (For detail *see* Reuters 5 November 2005; WIC 5 November 2005).

i.e., individuals' desire for psychic gratification (to bolster their self-esteem) (Chandra 2002: 4). Horowitz (1985: 308) argues that politicians who organize ethnic parties find "a ready-made clientele...waiting to be led." In the struggle for resources and political power, politicians mobilize people by dividing them along ethnic lines (Yeros 1999).

Some works consider ethnic divisions as one of the causes for the weaknesses of political parties in Africa. It is also argued that the lack of class divisions and the absence of strong civil society led African political parties to be established along ethnic lines. For instance, Lawson (1999: 12) argued, "In the absence of formal associations clearly apart from the state and capable of engaging the population, the introduction of liberal democratic procedures, at the behest of external donors, had led political parties to appeal to the only available alternative: ethnic identity."

In Ethiopia, though Haile Selassie's Imperial government banned the formation of all types of political parties, ethnic-based parties were formed outside the country and waged armed struggle in the country. The Derg government also outlawed all political parties, except its own party, the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) and made the country a one-party state. As Chege et al (2007: 36) noted the coming to power of the EPRDF in 1991 made the country a multi-party state, but under the domination of one dominant-coalition party.

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