

Ethnic Federalism and Conflict Dynamics in Benishangul Gumuz Regional State, Ethiopia

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Abstract: *This study aims to analyze the Ethiopian ethnic-based federalism and the conflict trends in the Metekel zone of Benishangul Gumuz Regional State. To achieve this objective, the study employed a qualitative research approach, gathering data from both primary and secondary sources. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were utilized in selecting key informants and focus group participants. Data from secondary and primary sources are analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that the politicization of ethnicity and the nature of Ethiopia's federal system are the main factors that exacerbated the Metekel conflict. Along with these, economic competition, inadequate political representation of non-indigenous people and the political changes of 2018 have intensified the conflict. Furthermore, government actions have been perceived as insufficient and ineffective. Overall, the data indicates that ethnic elites have successfully manipulated identity for socio-economic and political purposes, which led to the emergence of interethnic conflict in the study area.*

Keywords: *Federalism; Ethnic federalism; Ethnic conflict; Ethnic elites; Ethnicity; Ethiopia*

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INTRODUCTION

Federalism is a multi-level system of governance that integrates elements of both self-rule and shared rule. It is an ideology grounded on the benefits of accommodating, preserving, and fostering distinct identities within the wider political community. There is no comprehensive set of principles that explain why states opt to form a particular sort of federation. Every federation is the result of distinct historical and political circumstances. They have compelling reasons behind their choice of federations (Davis, 1978). States may create a federation for political grounds that support liberty, democracy, or accommodation of diversity (Elazar, 1987).

In the process of structuring their federating units, federations are mainly categorized into two groups. The first group organizes their units in a way that is convenient for administration, and the second group organizes their units based on ethnicity and language. Most of the older western federations, such as the USA, Germany, and Australia, organize their units in a way that is convenient for administration and ensures territorial power sharing (Asnake, 2013). According to Burgess (2006), such federations are commonly referred to as national or mono-national federations. The group in the second category not only recognizes ethnic and linguistic diversity but also incorporates it into its structures and ideologies (Asnake, 2010). Multinational or ethnic federations are the names given to such federations. Ethiopia is a country that is mainly mentioned among the countries that have based their federation on the basis of ethnicity and language.

In Ethiopia, federalism as a system of government began to be adopted in 1991, right after the fall of the Derg, and its principal objective was to bring a sustainable political solution to the question of the nation, nationalities,

and peoples of Ethiopia. *Benishangul Gumuz* Regional State (BGRS) is among the regions established under this type of administrative framework. However, the constitution of BGRS under Article 2 defined the people as 'indigenous and non-indigenous', which led to unequal representation and participation of all citizens located in the region. This mindset and practice have a significant negative influence on the local non-indigenous communities. Indeed, because of this, it has been observed that conflicts between indigenous and non-indigenous communities have arisen at various times in the region and in the *Metekel* zone in particular.

In fact, the conflict in the study area dates back to the period of Emperor Haile Selassie I, when the first resettlement took place, and continued until the establishment of the current federal system. But the conflict trajectories scroll with new conflict contexts and new actors with a changing dynamism. Both indigenous and non-indigenous individuals living in the region experienced combat trauma that worsened over time. Particularly after the introduction of the new structure, the issue between indigenous and non-indigenous people is getting disastrous. The titular ethnic groups have a history of violent confrontation with the non-indigenous communities in the *Metekel* area.

One of our most recent conflicts that happened in the *Metekel* zone was the one that occurred in 2019. There have been fatalities and mass displacement due to the violent clashes between indigenous and non-indigenous ethnic groups in several parts of the zone. In addition, the conflict was spreading faster than in the past to include nearby *kebeles* and *weredas*. Thus, this study attempts to analyze Ethiopia's ethnic-based federalism and conflict trends in *Benishangul Gumuz* Regional States, with a focus on the *Metekel* zone. By doing this, the researchers anticipate addressing conflict trends, their causes and triggering factors, and the efforts of conflict management in the study area. The result of this research will offer pertinent insights for policy intervention and shed light on the academic discourse.

METHODS

In this study, a qualitative approach was used to thoroughly examine participants' viewpoints. The study was of the inductive kind, which derives meaning from field data, and the result only represents the study area and cannot be generalized to other cases. Furthermore, this study employed a case study design since it is a qualitative approach in which the researcher uses single or multiple cases in detail and in great depth using multiple sources of data (Kumar, 2011; Creswell, 2007).

The study used primary and secondary data sources for data collection. The primary data sources were gathered in 2020 by using semi-structured interview questions to conduct in-depth interviews with twelve key informants and two focus group discussion (FGD) participants, each with seven members. Accordingly, the interview was conducted over the phone as well as in person. Most participants were selected from *Dangur* and *Mandura weredas*, as the recurrent conflict was frequently observed with its reasonable number of deaths and displacements. The selection of participants for the key informants and FGDs was conducted using purposive and snowball sampling, taking into account their knowledge, experiences, positions, and familiarity with the topic under discussion. The majority of participants included representatives from the community, experts, security officers, political party leaders, and officials from both the zonal and woreda levels. Additionally, data was gathered from secondary sources, such as written documents that addressed the topic under discussion, such as books, journals, dissertations, theses, and reports. Finally, the collected data had been analyzed thematically.

Review of Related Literature

Federalism and conflict management

It should come as no surprise that social scientists have identified the establishment of regional political structures of self-rule as one mechanism of conflict reduction in their exploration of federalism as a governing concept. It is one of the most important tools of collective representation, providing autonomy to the constituent regional political structures (Erk & Anderson, 2009). According to Horowitz, the division of authority between states and the center has the potential to reduce conflict (1985: 602). Different nations have adopted federalism as a system to take advantage of favorable economic and security conditions as well as to accommodate diverse identities in the political arena (Kavalski & Zolkos, 2008).

Conflict management is an act of conflict regulation that intends to cover all forms of conflict intervention to control ongoing violence. Conflict management has the elements of conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and conflict transformation to reach its end goal of positive peace (Geotschel, 2009). From the perspective of federalism, conflict management regulates ethnic group disparities within a nation by ensuring equal representation and political involvement in federal political institutions. It allowed them to distribute resources and power based on need. In doing so, conflict management in a federal arrangement prevents considerable long-term violence that could erupt from structural imbalances among factional groups. The federal institutions could articulate institutional mechanisms to accommodate differences so as to achieve national unity and integrity by being partial and fair representatives, but it is without forgetting that it will not be a panacea for all problems of ethnicity (Anderson, 2017). Because of this, the majority of states with diverse populations around the world favor federalism as a strategy for managing conflicts by safeguarding minorities and maintaining greater political cohesion after putting its fundamental ideas into practice. It brings administrative convenience and lessens the costs of the central government, even beyond local conflict management.

However, due to its inadequate handling of interethnic conflict, the federalist system is not immune to criticisms that worsen conflict and undermine national unity. In third-world nations, political mobilization is practically recognized to be based on ethnic affiliations. The problem worsens when there are political and economic motives behind it (Alemante, 2003). State resources will be diverted and marginalized to the benefit of politically powerful ethnic groups, meaning that these groups will also profit economically. The development of relative impoverishment and exclusion from their national resources is a result of such an endeavor, which is not desired. Furthermore, ethnic factionalism cannot be dealt with by the institutional frameworks in a democratic and just manner. For those who oppose federalism, this means that it creates an environment that is conducive to conflict, which in turn leads to human rights abuses, insecurity, mass displacement, and political unrest. This is the tragic policy failure of federalism's unity in diversity in most African states, coupled with poor conflict management abilities (Alemante, 2003).

Ethnic Conflict

Smith and Katz (1993) argued that ethnicity is a traditional conception attached to the common myth, ancestral ties, and shared memory of history among a group of people in the period before the two world wars took place. But it gets momentum in the new developments after being manipulated in post-Cold War politics. This suggested that an ethnic conflict could be conceptualized as a conflict where the goals of at least one conflict party are defined in ethnic terms and in which the primary fault line of confrontation is conscious of ethnic distinction (Wolff, 2006). When there is a conflict of this kind, at least one of the parties will use ethnic terms to justify their dissatisfaction. That is, one party will argue that their unique ethnic identity prevents them from realizing their rights, from realizing their interests, or from having their claims met. Thus, ethnic conflicts are a type of group conflict where a party or parties understand the dispute, its causes, and possible solutions along an actual or perceived ethnic division that discriminates against one another (Wolff, 2006).

The concept of ethnicity and ethnic conflict is problematic and controversial; scholars explain the concept using three theoretical stances: primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism (Young, 1993). Primordialists hold the argument that the importance of human beings is attributed to a natural and biological factor that is neither predictable nor fortunate but is connected to unique and very close nurturing and relationships that make a bond from generation to generation with an experience of deeply rooted, intimate, and eternal belonging to the same ancestral origin. Primordialists associate a person's identity with their biological makeup. The supporters of this approach linked ethnic conflict to an inevitable natural process. Based on the basic assumption of their approach, primordialists criticize the social constructionist thesis of ethnic groups for its disregard of tradition and the fundamental feature of human existence. Even the primordialists do not escape the criticism that ethnic division is always static.

According to the theory of instrumentalism, ethnic conflict is not directly caused by ethnic identity; rather, it is only caused when ethnic identities are politicized and manipulated to give one ethnic group political and

socioeconomic advantages at the expense of other ethnic groups (Posen, 1993; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). As a result, instrumentalists use variables other than ethnic identity to justify ethnic disputes. Among these are worries about security (Posen, 1993); inequality and rivalry (Gurr, 1993); and greed (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). The instrumentalists saw ethnicity as a fabrication created by specific elites or groups motivated by the desire for social prestige, economic gain, political power, or other goals and purposes as a simple mobilization tool (Messay, 2001). The instrumentalist approach holds the attachments of cultural differences to political cleavages. So, instrumentalists say that shared political experiences and the ability to remember politics the same way are more important than common descent when it comes to building ethnic consciousness and the belief in a shared ethnicity that can be used to get what you want. In doing so, ethnic elites use ethnicity as a tool to achieve their own political and economic agendas (Cohen, 2003).

The fundamental tenet of the constructionist approach is that ethnicity is socially constructed in the continuous social interactions of human societies (Tadros & Adlparvar, 2016). The constructivist approach places a strong emphasis on the processes that lead to the formation and evolution of ethnic group identities. Ethnic identities are therefore dynamic; they are passed on via families, other social actors such as teachers, political involvement, and the active engagement of the ethnic group members themselves (Jenkin, 2008). Ethnicity is no more fixed or unchanged than a way of life that is produced and reproduced (Jenkin, 2008:14). This construction of ethnicity is propagated by the following three actors: the agents of individuals, discursive formations, or broad structural forces (Tadros & Adlparvar, 2016). When theorizing ethnic conflict, this subgroup of constructionist literature argues that broad structural forces, for example, modernization, can lead to ethnic conflict, but it does not provide a general explanation for how ethnic conflict arises from the desire for modernization (Eriksen, 2002). Even though the above-mentioned theories have correlations with the concept of ethnic conflict, the researchers selected the two theoretical approaches, primordialism and instrumentalism, that more fully describe the Metekel conflict.

Ethiopian Federalism and Ethnic Conflict: An Overview

Following the downfall of the military regime in 1991, the EPRDF government changed the state from a unitary system to a federal arrangement based on ethnicity. With the approval of the 1995 FDRE constitution, the federal structure that had evolved during the transitional period became institutionally grounded (Alem, 2003). The goals of federalization include building democracy, providing a long-term solution to the nationality questions, and achieving enduring peace by acknowledging the equality of all nations, nationalities, and peoples (Merera, 2006; Alem, 2003; Young, 1996; Cohen, 1995). Although these are the main rationales given to establish a federal system, what has been seen in practice is that the system was implemented without meaningful discussion and understanding with the community, but instead, it is a system implemented in a top-down manner.

According to the 1995 Federal Constitution, the regions established in the country shall take into account settlement pattern, language, identity, and the consent of the community. But when we look at most regional structures, we find that they are mainly based on language and identity. This does not mean that all the ethnic groups in Ethiopia have achieved autonomy (Abink, 2006; Asnaq, 2010; Turton, 2006). Instead, minority ethnic groups residing in different regions did not get proper representation. This can cause relative denial of administrative pleasure and identity-based tensions inside the bounds of the territory where they live. In this case, following the federal inducement, we can mention some pragmatic inter-ethnic conflicts within the country, such as the Oromo-Amhara conflict, the Amhara-Kimant conflict, the Afar-Amhara conflict, the Gedeo-Guji conflict, and the Anyewa-Nuer conflict.

The new administration, which was stripped of its authority due to the widespread protests against the TPLF/EPRDF-led administration, carried out internal reforms and nominated Abiy Ahmed as the Prime Minister. As a result, beginning in April 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government implemented political reform, which has received commendation in many areas. The major reforms include media freedom, the release of thousands of political prisoners, allowing previously banned political parties and groups to operate peacefully in the country, appointing non-party figures to influential positions, and repealing laws used to target political opponents (Semir, 2019). These short-term measures boosted many Ethiopians' hopes and morale. Though the country has seen remarkable progress in terms of political liberalization, there have been widespread killings,

property destruction, and displacement in different parts of the country. Even though Ethiopia is not new to ethnic-based conflicts, their scale and intensity in the short time since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali's rise to power are extremely worrying. The main question here is why there has been an increase in ethnically motivated attacks and subsequent displacements, particularly after 2018.

The conflict in *Benishangul Gumuz* regional state occurs periodically and gets worse with the passage of time. Prior to 1991, the nature of disputes was limited to neighboring populations that frequently engaged in low-intensity resource conflicts and cultural battles, such as those between the *Amhara* and *Gumuz* in the *Metekel* area and the *Oromo* and *Gumuz* in the southern parts of the region. However, the post-1991 conflict has taken on a distinct character since the creation of the regional administration.

The constitution of BGRS on Article 2 defined the people as 'indigenous and non-indigenous'. Due to this categorization, the non-indigenous group was not allowed to participate equally in regional politics or have equal representation. In the region, only five ethnic groups are recognized as the owners of the region; other communities, despite having a sizable population, did not receive appropriate acknowledgement, which makes their dissatisfaction apparent. It has, thus, led to social and political unrest between the indigenous and non-indigenous populations.

RESULTS

Conflict and Conflict Trends in the Metekel Zone of Benishangul Gumuz Regional State

Metekel is one of the three zones in *Benishangul Gumuz* regional state, located along the north-western frontiers of Ethiopia. It is bordered by Kemashi zone in the south and southwest, Sudan in the west, *Amhara* region in the north and east. The center of the zone is the city of Galgel Beles, which is 546 kilometers away from the capital city of Addis Ababa. According to the 2007 national census, the total population of the zone is 276,367, of which 139,119 are males and 137,248 are females. The zone is divided into seven districts which are *Bullen*, *Dangur*, *Dibate*, *Guba*, *Mandura*, *Wumbera* and *Pawi* districts. The largest ethnic groups reported to live in the area are *Gumuz*, *Shinasha*, *Agew*, *Amhara* and *Oromo* (CSA, 2007). The working language of the zone is *Amharic*.

Causes of Conflict

Economic Causes

Metekel has abundant resources including virgin lands and ongoing major national projects including the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and other agricultural products. It was around 1950 that the wealth attracted many migrants and flowed to *Metekel* (Teferi, 2014). Informants from the local natives pointed out that the migration into the zone is a major cause of conflict between the indigenous and non-indigenous groups. When people migrated to the zone from neighboring areas, their numbers were so large that they even established their own *kebeles*. For instance, the *Metekel* zone administrator disclosed that approximately 10,000 individuals enter the zone annually, mainly from the *Gojjam*, *Gondar*, and *Wollo* areas of the *Amhara* region. These create a kind of tension and fight for resources and aggravate the conflict in the area.

The lack of implementation of a standardized land use policy has also exposed the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples through unfair and unbalanced land rent negotiations. As such agreements are based on existing local land transfer, development and ownership systems; they are not legally binding contracts. In fact, the use of land by indigenous and non-indigenous people has a different meaning. For the indigenous, the land is not only related to agriculture, but also has a cultural component of ancestral land ownership. Indigenous people are stuck with identity issues. The informants argued that indigenous people reclaimed the land that they rented 30 or more years ago. Therefore, reclaiming the leased land after a long period of time creates conflict.

The non-indigenous farmers do not have security over their land as there is no land policy to ensure that the land belongs to them. Basically, the constitution of the state forces them to be found only as 'others' without reference to their basic rights, so there is an institutional basis for denying permanent land ownership rights to non-indigenous farmers. Key informants and focus group participants in *Manbuk* noted that violence worsens during

the harvest because of its economic implications. Most of the land is leased by *Agew* and *Amhara* farmers under traditional local contracts, leading to confiscation during the harvest season and exploitation of their produce.

In fact, some of the respondents who identified themselves as indigenous confirmed that both indigenous and non-indigenous have suffered as a result of the conflict. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the people of *Gumuz* are dependent on the agricultural production of *Agew* and *Amhara*. As a result, famine occurred on both sides. To make it specific, the *Gumuz* society in *Akotet kebele* of *Mandura Woreda* faces a critical famine caused by the 2019 conflict. People are displaced and detached from their agricultural practices, which results in diminishing production and intensify the famine in the area. In the same way, the urban dwellers among non-indigenous people are unable to have better economic activity. Thus, the *Amhara* and *Agew* people are strategically and technically forced to be displaced and expelled from the area by inflicting their economic base.

Informants from the indigenous people responded by saying that the non-indigenous people are land grabbers with an unfriendly approach to the environment. Due to their carelessness and irresponsible farming practices, they prosper at the cost of the environment. Thus, they argue, it threatens their long-term survival. However, despite occasional conflicts, deforestation for agricultural land continues. As a result, the indigenous people feel a sense of relative deprivation from their region's resources and lead to resort conflict. The conflicts are active seasonally and are most visible in harvest seasons and were indeed creating problems for both indigenous and non-indigenous people.

Political Causes

The political system in *Metekel* has an important role both in aggravating and calming conflicts. The *Metekel* administrative *zone* requires proactive and flexible leadership to effectively manage political issues and respond to emerging conflicts. However, the political competence and effectiveness of leaders is questionable. In other words, the political bodies are ineffective when it comes to handling the complex issue of *Metekel*. This political inefficacy has significantly contributed to the recurring conflicts that have arisen at various times.

Participants from non-indigenous groups reported that, the political leaders of the *zone*, instead of treating the people with neutrality, displayed deliberate neglect and bias, which fostered ethnic sentiments. Consequently, the political leadership in the *zone* is highly problematic, exacerbating the conflict as it attempts to manage and address it. The key informants argued that the problem is structurally chained from the regional government to the *zone*, *wereda*, and then to the *kebele*. In the focus group discussion one of the participants from the *Gumuz* community further supports this argument by stating that most of the leadership and people prefer to live together in peace instead of expressing their grief.

In the unfolding conflict, the regional security machinery is not functioning cohesively, as some are working to de-escalate the conflict while others are aggravating the situation. Amidst this turmoil, both indigenous and non-indigenous communities are suffering from death and displacement. The zonal security head, in collaboration with the regional peace and security affairs deputy officer, provoked ethnic-based violence and displacement and the practice in a chain structure. The provocation of violence are underway, involving youths, returned and retired soldiers, militias, and other like-minded ethnic actors.

In addition, individuals and politicians are suspicious of the 2018 political change, thinking that it will destroy their previous advantages. In response, the *Metekel* administration banned support demonstrations for the newly appointed Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, with the exception of *Pawi*. Informants assert that the security machinery in the *zone* is standing with their ethnic fellows. This practice of eviction and displacement is particularly prevalent in the remote districts and *kebeles* of *Mandura* and *Dangur* where many *Gumuz* communities reside.

Besides, in the *Metekel zone*, there are different political parties operating in the zone with their own respective political agendas. However, in one or another way, the political parties have strong ties with their own ethnic group. Thus, the agendas and political objectives of those political parties are not extended to other ethnic groups but rather stick to the ethnicity sensitively. Such political sentiments and exclusionary practices cannot bring a

genuine and lasting solution, rather than declaring themselves as a vanguard of the respective ethnic line arrangement. One of the good things about such an organization is the ease of mobilization for the respective political parties. Thus, different political parties operated in *Metekel* are a mirror reflection of the national political experience, as stated by informants.

The number of political parties in *Metekel* is almost all equivalent to the ethnic categories residing in the zone. In the *Metekel* zone, *Benishangul Gumuz* People's Democratic Party (BGPDP) and Amhara National Democratic Movement (now shifted to Benishangul Gumuz and Amhara Prosperity Party, respectively), Amhara National Movement (ANM), *Agaw* National *Shengo* (ANS), Western Ethiopia People's Party (WEPP), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and *Boro Shinasha* Democratic Party (BODP) are active politically charged actors engaged in the *Metekel* situation in close proximity. Due to their nature of exclusion toward non-member ethnic fellows, they do not have a tool of cooperation; rather, they set an agenda of competition and dominance, which upgrades the complexity of the *Metekel* conflict.

Structural Problem

The 1995 FDRE constitution implicitly denies the existence of other people who cannot be defined by the ethnic markers specified in the constitution. For example, there could be many people with mixed identities who do not have a close affiliation with one of the ethnic groups in the country but are forced to opt; therefore, they may define themselves only as Ethiopians (Aalen, 2006). This is demonstrated by lower attention to citizenship rights and a lack of minority rights protection in the regional states (Beken, 2007). The focus on ethnicity in the constitution leads to competition based on ethnicity to control state resources and identity-based demands to set up ethnically-based local governments. This gives elite ethnic groups more access to state resources (Asnake, 2010; Aalen, 2006).

The conditions described earlier are evident in the *Metekel* and conflict scenarios, where ethnicity-based primordial tie are reinforced by the ongoing influence of ethnic elites. This dynamics fosters conflict among and between different ethnic groups. That is why recurrent conflict is experienced in the area, facilitated by a primordial basis coupled with an instrumental political elite role. Non-indigenous informants largely agree on this perspective.

Consequently, the ethnic-based conflict between the indigenous and non-indigenous communities in *Metekel* has deep structural roots, reflecting a failure of institutional frameworks to genuinely address the questions of ethnic groups. Therefore, the role of the state at large played a significant role in the recurring conflicts, emanating from the institutional and policy frame shortcomings in treating ethnic groups with impartially.

The primary aim of adopting federalism was to prevent the ethnic armed struggle that the country faced in its past. To this end, ethnic parties were encouraged to emerge and lead their respective regions. However, the politics of an ethnically represented state, particularly under the ethnic federation model, was full of ironies. Ethnic federalism has been grafted onto centralized state system, and the BGRS mirrors this challenges. A significant issue within this new structure is the political representation of ethnic minorities in regional governments. The BGRS constitution does not provide political representation to 'non-indigenous people', highlights flaws in its adherence to federal principles for the representation of internal minorities.

According to the revised BGRS constitution of 2002, Article 2 declared that the five ethnic groups namely *Berta*, *Gumuz*, *Shinasha*, *Mao* and *Komo* are to be represented in the regional councils with designated seats. The constitution classifies these ethnic groups as indigenous and sovereign people of the region, grating them political representation in the state legislative, executive and judicial bodies. However, other ethnic groups such as the *Agew*, *Amhara*, *Oromo*, *Hadya*, and *Tigrayans* who also resides within the region's territorial administration are labeled as 'other peoples' and are denied political representation and recognition in regional politics. This institutional denial of representation underscores a structural basis for the conflict between indigenous and non-indigenous communities.

The 2018 Political Reform and Its Implications for the Conflict Pattern

The political reform introduced in 2018 has been perceived differently by indigenous and non-indigenous people, shaped by their political experiences. Non-indigenous people welcomed the political change and show their support in public demonstrations. This support emanates from the hope that the national political reform would fix the long-standing problems of *Metekel*. On the contrary, the indigenous people reacted negative to the reform. Besides, *zone* and *wereda* leaders exhibited strong resistant to change, which contributed to their involvement in the conflicts of 2019. Consequently, many *zone*, *wereda* and *kebele* leaders have been arrested for being involved in the killing and displacement of people. In the criminal lists, there are *Tigrians*, *Shinasha*, as well as *Gumuz* elites and political and security personnel who participating in directing the conflict. During the violence, local elites of the *zone* exacerbated tensions by warning about the negative consequences of the reforms for *Gumuz* communities, claiming that the reform would threaten their right to self-governance and pave the way for non-indigenous land grabbers. They argued that the new political reform is unitary and intends to returns the old political tradition. Such unfounded provocations instigate violence in *Gumuz* society.

The focus group discussants also argued that the ethnic conflict have also provided a political advantage, particularly for the TPLF. One of the pieces of evidence that they want is a “weak revelation of the change” and a presentation of TPLF as the best alternative governance in the region. This crisis-oriented political strategy seems to benefit for the politicians operating against the change, both in the minds of indigenous and non-indigenous people. As the displacement and the death were spontaneous and massive, many indigenous people felt a sense of satisfaction in achieving their goal of “freeing *Metekel* from *Amhara* and *Agew*.”

The non-indigenous people also experienced trauma, and feeling unprotected by the new changes. In this regard, key informants from victims displaced from *Almahal* also desperately expressed the then-time nightmare. The ongoing violence and displacement have eroded their assumptions about the genuineness of the change. This was, in fact, the interest of the elites in changing the mentality of political reform by instigating the conflict. This idea has also been proven in the discussion at the *Manbuk* FGD. Moreover, the people were disturbed by the information disseminated from each direction, resulting in the biggest *zonal* destabilization and displacement of many people.

As an informant from the *Shinasha* argued, following the coming of Abiy in March 2018, the *zonal* political bodies held a political stand against him, and the people had no such detailed and well-articulated information about the new reform at the time. But the political leaders were actively engaged in change-resistance promotions to the people. The informants argued that the political change was measured from a rational standpoint. As a result of this, the regional and *zonal* political leaderships want to stick with the old ethnic federalism and feel discomfort with the thought of political liberalization.

The violence and conflict trend, therefore, has reshuffled following the national political change. Sources from this conflict in the area stated that the political change at the national level was seen with suspicion in the eyes of the indigenous people. The assassination of the Amhara national regional state higher officials in June 2019 has its own role; the *Gumuz* feel “Amhara has not protected” and take their usual measure. The ground for such a suspect was preached by the federalist forces, in which the Abiy government will collapse the federal system and change it with a new engine of political teaching. However, such arguments lack evidence. As the lived political trend assured, neither the federalism nor the current bandage political change alleviate the deep-rooted conflict and violence of *Metekel*.

Even in the post-conflict measure, people were forced to return to the Amhara region after they went back to *Metekel* because they did not have an identity card while they lived before the conflict. This was another act of political negligence not to give an identity card to some who lived for six months in a specific place, which contradicts the law of the state. The response of the public relations head officer of the *zone* argued that it is very difficult to separate who lives permanently and migrates in a short period of time. In addition to this, the seasonal mobility of people is huge, and after the seasonal work is over, people turn back home without showing their identity cards. This makes the situation quite difficult to manage. Generally, the 2018 political change pulled at

two extremes, sandwiching the non-indigenous people in *Metekel*, which has been woven by the political elites standing on extreme political ideology.

Alternative Measures Induced to Avert the Recurrent Conflict

The BGRS and ANRS governments reached an agreement that solving the problem is very essential, not only for the people, but also critical to safeguarding the national projects operated in the area, like the GERD and other related big projects, from destruction in times of violent conflict. For this, the regional governments proposed plans to work in cooperation at each level of administration. In addition, minimizing public security risks and ensuring rule of law to stabilize the zone, trying to handle accurate displaced people profiles, and sending the profiles to the *woredas* and *kebeles* for the right return of the displaced people are the prime concerns.

In addition to this, fulfilling the necessary logistics to return the displaced people to their home villages is among the plan orientations agreed upon by the two regional governments on the table. In doing so, the first minimum condition was to reach consensus with *woreda* and *kebele* leaders to ease the return of the displaced people. Unless the situation is very difficult and people have a great risk of losing their security and being victims of recycling conflict, as agreed in the discussion on the table,

After reaching this consensus, a committee was established with five organizations. The first is the core committee, the second is the public relations and reconciliation subcommittee, the security and law-enforcing committee, the fourth is the food security and rehabilitation committee, and the last is the crime-examining committee. These are the organizations involved in the plans for the return of displaced people. The core committee is led by joint members selected from both the two regional governments, composed of zone and *woreda* leaders, as well as federal and regional security bodies and food security professionals, who get together and discuss the issue at *Gilgel Beles* town and forward it to *woreda* and *kebele* leaders.

The public level discussion was conducted in towns and rural *kebeles* where there were relative problems in the conflict. In the discussion, elders, religious leaders, and the people were engaged. The chosen places with a greater degree of conflict dynamics were *Gilgel Beles* town, *Manbuk* town, *Genetemaryam*, and *Dawunz* displacement center, which were the major areas where wide public discussion took place. Basically, such public-level discussions and participation in reconciliations are very important to protect against further ignites of conflicts between indigenous and non-indigenous people.

The general tone of the people raised in these conferences was the inability of the political leaders to treat the people impartially, and the political leaders are not even ready to learn from the previous wrongs. In the conflicts, no one would win, rather than destabilizing the zone and exposing the people to unfair and illegal economic scrambling. Moreover, the participants claimed that the displaced people must return immediately with proper logistics and security guarantees. Unless the rule of law is respected, peace in the region will have far-reaching consequences. To bring peace, criminals should be arrested. Unless the peace is restored, we cannot plough, and starvation took the first step, which recycles the problem. Organized robbery, banditry, avenges, and confiscations are the main issues boldly raised at each conference center.

In order to restore peace and security in the zone, ensuring the rule of law is a prime task. To implement it, the two regions in adjacent *woredas* give due attention to ensuring peace and security. It has been agreed that unless peace and security are achieved in the zone, the conflict will relapse, which makes the recycling of conflict inevitable. More importantly, the displaced people will be endangered. From this perspective, in *Dangur*, *Mandura*, *Wombera*, and *Gilgel Beles* town, including *Jawi woreda*, newly emerged conflicts are being observed in 2020 that need to strengthen security forces to avert conflicts. In this *woredas*, the purpose of evoking conflict was to intimidate the displaced people and to unsecure the returning people by proving that peace is absent. In this respect, the FGD discussant of indigenous people also assured that insecurity prohibits the return of people to a greater degree.

Starting from the flash point of the conflict, it is believed that resource grabbery and robbery were part and parcel of the conflict. This was a devastating consequence that exposed the zone to more economic demand and resource destruction. As a result, in the post-conflict period, starvation occurred because of this amount of resource depletion and burglary. To curb the problems, different efforts were made by different stakeholders to return the robbed resources, though there are unreturned destroyed resources like the burned houses and the commodities inside them. In the process, both elderly court negotiations and lawful measures were employed accordingly. But compared to the resources destroyed and robbed, the measures taken were not as fruitful and successful.

Following the Metekel conflict of 2019, the above-mentioned measures have been taken by both of the two regional governments and some federal task forces so as to restore peace in the area. Despite this, the zone is experiencing sudden attacks even in the presence of the federal police and the military. But it has to be underlined that the conflicts are deescalated by the federal police in coordination with the military stationed in the area. For this, the insurgents changed their tactic from an ethnic mobilization of conflict to guerilla fighting. One of the key informants passionately argued that the Metekel conflict was lasting long and that spontaneous conflicts in different parts of the zone happened. As a result, the measures taken previously could not address the problem from its root. Thus, conflict recycling is highly predictable, unless political questions have to be addressed with political measures. In this regard, one of the FGD participants stated that the military and security measures of switching fire are like 'covering fire with ash that could blow in the coming wind.' The Metekel disorder is similar in that sending an armament option for each and every conflict could not bring a final solution, and it is obvious that conflicts will happen when the federal police and the command post leave the area.

Challenges of Conflict Management

The Metekel conflict is challenging to manage and control because of the multifaceted actors and interests. Based on the information gained from key informants, FGD results, and the written documents, conflicts lapse and relapse again and again. The conflicts happen sporadically here and there, in spite of the presence of the command post-led federal police and military. The military itself faces sudden attacks from insurgents while patrolling. The challenge why the conflict recurs frequently is that the area is experiencing different actors with multiple interests. In addition, political leaders and land brokers have an open and hidden interest in exacerbate the conflict.

Moreover, ethnicized political parties, their frontier nature, illegal arm mobility with international borders with Sudan, and competent economic forces all contributed to prolonged conflict. Ethnic line protection of security and police, absence of necessary logistics and infrastructural facilities—all these are the challenges for conflict management. In the silencing of erupting conflicts, the military and security could not access the farthest areas from the main road, which is also another challenge that creates fertile conditions for illegal arm mobility and violence. Recently, the conflict dynamics changed from ethnic-wise mobilization to genocidal discriminatory violence targeted at non-indigenous innocents in gorilla style. The short-lived nature of measures taken in an unorganized manner without touching the structural root of the problem is vital for its continuity. The presence of the EGRD and the adjacent nature of the zone with Sudan, along with its poor infrastructure and incompetent leadership, make the area fragile and conflict-exposed. Generally, the Metekel resource endowment, combined with competing ethnic diversity and incompetent leadership, exacerbated and complicated the ethnic line governance and conflict in Metekel. These challenges make the Metekel syndrome unceasing.

CONCLUSION

The ethnic-based federal arrangement that was introduced in post-1991 Ethiopia was supposed to be promising in alleviating historical marginalization by empowering the previous minorities via the federal institutions and their tools of diversity celebrations and managing conflict. While the system theoretically promoted democratic values such as decentralization, political freedom, and representation, these ideals largely remained unfulfilled in practice. Despite the rewards of promoting identity, self-rule, and recognition of culture, the federal system has come up with its own political mess. This system established ethnic-based regions, using ethno-linguistic markers as the sole criterion. As a result, ethnic identity become politicized and becomes the fundamental organizing principle for economic, social, and political entitlements. Indeed, in post-1991 Ethiopia, ethnicity became the

epicenter of party formation, representation, participation, and enjoyment of rights. As a result, ethnic elites create and use ethnic differences as a short cut to personal and collective ends. The elites manipulated ethnic identity and planted odium and animosity in the healthy relations of the people as a drive to power, resources, or other benefits. The system also created an ethnic border between people who had lived together. The regionalization project split people into different regions and created borders with little consideration of cultural interdependence, historical settlement arrangements, and common resource sharing.

Hence, ethnic-based demarcation created border and resource claims among ethnic elites. Consequently, erratic local resource clashes and political representation are transformed into identity and regional conflict. On the other hand, the overemphasis on ethnicity corroded the identity of national sentiment. Common national values and symbols are eroded, and the 'we' versus 'them' mentality is planted into narrowly defined territorial residential confinement congruent with ethnicity. This leads to polarized inter-ethnic relations that end with violence, death, and displacement. The *Metekel* conflict has had almost all the features of conflict that federalism brought to the state. The regional constitution created an indigenous and non-indigenous dichotomy between people who have lived in the area for ages. Thus, the measure that the federalism induced in the area creates counter marginalization against the non-indigenous people. Denial of representation in the political institutions, coupled with socio-economic injustice, would endure the conflictual confrontation in the area.

The 2019 conflict that outbreak was the extension of the long stayed institutional gap of the system that caused death and mass displacement in the *zone*. What makes this conflict different from its previous counterpart is that the conflict was resulting huge consequences with different dynamics. Evidences revealed, almost all complete clearing of the non-indigenous people have been recorded. As a result of this chronic problem many people have been cleared out of *Metekel*. It implies that the issue goes beyond being purely ethnic conflict rather it has political motives instigated by the political elites having an interest of "free *Metekel* from Amhara and Agew." This plan, yet not stated in a clear statement, is run secretly by the concerted actions of the political elites, *zonal* personnel, and security bodies. For this reason, the people were systematically forced to flee from *Metekel*. The *Metekel* conflict also has the implication of a spillover effect that may initiate a conducive condition for proxy war so as to disturb the GERD and other investment projects of the state, both from internally and externally deviant forces.

Therefore, considering the findings of the study, the researchers recommended the following to address the recurrent conflict patterns in *Metekel*. A fundamental gap in the zone is the issue of political representation, which requires an institutional framework with a political solution. Without this, "*Metekel* syndrome" is likely to persist and evolve over time. The absence of a well-articulated solution that considers ethnic diversity, resource availability, weaker political leadership on the border fringes, and historical marginalization makes the area a highly conflict-prone zone. It is very difficult to solve the *Metekel* conflict with an effort of switching off flaring's here and there with military options. Temporary conflict management could not bring the desired lasting peace of conflict. Sustainable resolution of the *Metekel* conflict necessities comprehensive institutional reform that address the root causes of the issue at hand.

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