POLICY BRIEF ON INCLUSIVITY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF MINORITY GROUPS IN ETHIOPIA

Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia

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Executive Summary

Ethiopia's ethnic federalism and political representation of minorities has frequently been based on ethno-territorial organization, constitutional design, and power-sharing arrangements, but the rights of minorities under majority governance and their decision making power are often left out from public discourse. In the current political dispensation of Ethiopia minorities are not supported well, but they are also sometimes troubled and ignored. Unequal policies have resulted in discrimination of different rights in society. There are challenging issues regarding political participation of minority groups which can be a source of hostility in Ethiopia.

Background

The term 'minority' is not yet defined with its legal meaning and this has obscured the nature of the rights holder and its scope of application. Moreover, since the UN minority declaration doesn't provide for any clear definition, the only standard definition to refer is the subsequent attempt made to define minority by the then Special Rapporteur of UN on minority issues. Francesco Capotorti defines minorities as '*A group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a state, in a non-dominant position, whose members being nationals of the state-possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language'*. According to this definition the major criteria to be considered as minority are less numerical aspects, unique features that separate from the dominant groups, such as ethnic, religious, or linguistic differences and common sense of identity and a willingness that enable them to benefit from the protection. Minorities are also recognized in different constitutions of countries.

The FDRE Constitution is considered as one of the most minority friendly constitutions. It recognizes minorities by using the term "We the nations nationalities and peoples" rather than we the peoples; it recognize language rights: it states that all sovereign power of the state resides in the nation nationalities and peoples; it articulates that every nations, nationalities and peoples have the unconditional right of self-determination up to the point of secession; it guarantees each nations nationalities and peoples the right to equitable and fair representation at the federal and regional level of government and guarantees seats at the federal level.

Minorities in Ethiopia can be categorized as minorities based on electoral representation, minorities fighting for recognition, minorities as a result of ethnic based local governments, minorities as a result of border formations and referendum outcomes, and territorial and non-territorial minorities. Minority rights, as currently conceptualized in Ethiopia, are 'wrongly formulated" and accompanied by too much praise on territorial autonomy or too many down plays and condemnations.

In Ethiopia some of the outstanding challenges regarding inclusion and political participation of minorities are ethnic (political) fragmentation through claims of distinct identity recognition petitions and never ending minority demands, unabated claims for new ethnic territorial administrations as a means of securing political participation, the apparent dichotomy of native and non-native at the regional level (owning of territory and public institutions), the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system as not so ideal system for ensuring effective and inclusive participation of minorities and the political practice, which does not seem to provide a long lasting solution to monitories.

What can be done?

- **Reach consensus on ways to interpret and analyze history**

In Ethiopia there are divergent views regarding the conceptual and theoretical underpinning of minority groups and the fact that there were cases where minorities excluded from political participation is due to false narratives and historical injustices and the negative aspects of the language requirement to political participation. Minorities in some instances were abused and served different objectives other than ensuring sustainability and peace. To avoid this, trust and good will is needed from the government and other non-governmental actors. It is also vital to have dialogues between all the concerned bodies and the society. National and regional conferences, workshops and forums, funded research centers and academia could help to correct the historical dilemma and provide solutions.

The consensus can also be used as a means to enhance social cohesion, nation building, social and political reforms and to address root causes of conflict with a view to establish a viable and stable society.

- **Minorities enjoyment of freedom of expression and claiming recognition**

In the current context of Ethiopia there is a clear demand from the society for recognition and demarcation of territories. It is important to recognize the rights of minorities and build a democratic culture and a powerful human rights regime. In recognizing minorities it is also important to conduct a research whether there is the need to follow both the accommodating and assimilating approaches. In-depth nationwide research is needed to follow a suitable approach and to create a democratic culture.

- **Strengthening CSOs to advocate for the rights of Minorities**

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a pivotal role in advocating and reminding the government about its responsibility. CSOs and National Human Rights Institutions should be strengthened to create awareness, conduct research and advocate for the promotion and protection of minority rights.

Policy Recommendations

1. The government should work towards the inclusion of minorities in political participation and establish/strengthen organizations with clear mandates to respect the rights of minorities.
2. Assess the inclusivity of the electoral systems adopted by the country and come up with potential solutions. It can also help to create a framework within which effective political participation of minorities is ensured.
3. The national election board of Ethiopia should identify the pros and cons of the 'First Past Post-Election System' and language proficiency requirements to create a country in which minorities control their own affairs.
4. The government should also work on recognizing and respecting the rights of both the territorial and non-territorial minorities in Ethiopia.
5. CSOs to advocate for participation of minorities in the political process, the national dialogue and in transitional justice.
6. The government should come up with a strategy and long lasting solutions to solve conflicts emanating from minority issues and correct the historical dilemma and false narratives. This would help to ensure peace and stability in the country
7. Stakeholders should work on creating awareness regarding the importance of political participation of minorities.
8. All stakeholders should work on straightening democratic culture and a powerful human rights regime.

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