**Minority rights in Ethiopia**

The Special Rapporteur on minority issues

**Background**

Ethnic identity in Ethiopia is a significant aspect influenced by the country's ethnic federal system. This system has led to the ethnification of identity among the population, shaping the political landscape and societal perceptions. Ethiopia faces consecutive internal crises that have deepened in recent years, related to the problems of the management of ethnic diversity, and the resulting serious repercussions on the security and stability and even the unity of Ethiopia and its overall political, security, economic and social conditions, its external relations and its regional role. In this context, Elizka Relief Foundation submits its report on the rights of minorities in Ethiopia, with a highlight of the current situation of ethnic minorities in the country.

**Institutional arrangements of Ethiopia that enable minority rights to flourish**

Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multi-cultural country with diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. In this regard, the country can appropriately be described as a mosaic of different cultures and ethno-linguistic groups. Ethiopia adopted federalism in 1991.[[1]](#footnote-1) The primary aim of Ethiopian federalism is to accommodate the country’s diverse ethnic groups. Before 1991, Ethiopia had a centralized unitary government that suppressed diversity. It restricted ethnic groups from using their languages in official settings and schools. Article 39 of Ethiopia’s federal constitution, adopted in 1995, explicitly acknowledges the country’s ethnic diversity.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Ethiopian federalism grants ethnic groups the right to self-determination. An ethnic group can form its own region or become an independent country. This approach has drawn both praise and criticism. Despite a federalist constitutional structure that provides important autonomy and cultural rights for Ethiopia's diverse communities, many of Ethiopia's minorities and indigenous peoples continue to be marginalized.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As part of the ethnic federal/self-determination structure, the Constitution divided the country into nine states and declared that each ethnic minority placed within these states had an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to a full measure of self-government, and unilateral secession. Arguing that the House of the Federation (HoF), a federal non-legislative upper House comprising the representatives of the ethnic minorities, best protects human and minority rights in Ethiopia, the Constitution’s framers conferred an exclusive constitutional review power on this body. They also presented the Bill of Rights as guaranteeing adequate standards of rights and freedoms.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**The current reality of ethnic minorities in Ethiopia**

However, in Ethiopia, ethnic Federalism has not been able to resolve interethnic disputes. Ethnic group conflicts are become extremely widespread. People have died as a result of these wars, and other people have also been displaced and property destroyed. In addition, ethnic minorities are being driven out of different regions as a result of ethnic strife.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Nevertheless, attacks and ethnic violations in Ethiopia do not stop. Repeated reports of human rights violations as a result of the Ethiopian government's development strategy in the Lower Omo Valley and the Gambella led the US Congress to take action through its 2014 Appropriations Act. The legislation specifies that funds for development cannot be used to support activities that directly or indirectly involve forced evictions and that the use of funds shall be subject to a process of prior consultation with affected communities. While this was a significant victory for communities in the Lower Omo Valley and the Gambella, the impact of these provisions on the government's policies remains to be seen.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Currently, ethnic conflicts are exacerbated by what was raised in the Amhara region, the second largest area in Ethiopia in terms of population, about the government's endeavor to undermine the security of the region. Al -Amahr lives in northern Ethiopia, and they constitute about 26% of the population, and the Amhara forces participated alongside the government in its war against the Tigray region. After the war ended, the federal government ordered in April 2023 to integrate all security forces in the regions, either in the army or the national police. Violent protests that lasted a week in the Amhara region, and in August 2023 heavy fighting broke out between the Ethiopian army and the local militia of Vano in Amhara, and these problems are still ongoing. More than a thousand people were arrested across the country, many of whom were young men from the Ethnic group, according to the state of emergency announced by the government in response to violence.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In May 2023 alone, the government had reportedly detained over 4,500 ethnic Amhara individuals. This number surged following the declaration of the state of emergency by the government on August 4, 2023, with claims suggesting that around 14,000 Amhara individuals have since been apprehended.[[8]](#footnote-8) In June 2023, it was reported that regional authorities and Amhara security forces were engaged in ethnic cleansing, targeting Tigrayans in the Western Tigray Zone. Members of the Fano militia, an ethnic Amhara group, were also accused of forcibly expelling civilians. In Oromia, Amhara militants have been implicated in the killings of Oromo civilians and the displacement of tens of thousands of people in areas bordering Amhara. Fano militants were also accused of attacking ethnic Oromo residents within Oromia during the 2020–22 Tigray conflict.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Recommendations**

1. Elizka urges the Ethiopian government the existence of a democratic system, as the rule of law and the protection of federal individual rights lies by ensuring respect for citizen rights. Including a multi -party system, various sounds in making decisions and helping to protect minorities. Following these principles would help build peace and loneliness in a country that is ethnically diverse like Ethiopia.
2. Given the scale and gravity of the crimes committed and limited domestic efforts so far, ensuring that international investigations continue in parallel is key. Hence, we urge the Ethiopian government to investigate and prosecute war crimes committed by members of its security forces in civilian or military courts.
3. We call on the Ethiopian authorities on general knowledge of the history of minorities inside the lands of those countries and identify their traditions, languages and cultures, as well as enabling persons belonging to minorities to fully participate in economic and development progress.
4. Elizka appeals to the Ethiopian government, when implementing national policies and programs, to give the necessary consideration of minority interests in line with the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.
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2. What is federalism? Why Ethiopia uses this system of government and why it’s not perfect, the conversation, November 26, 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/56csjwbu> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. A comparative study of the Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz regions, 2009. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/13839> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Constitutional protection of human and minority rights in Ethiopia: myth v. reality, Melbourne Law School, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/bp6jn9bj> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Quest for Peace: Examining the Impact of Ethnic Federalism on Conflict Management in Ethiopia, Social Science and Humanities Journal, APR 13, 2024. <https://tinyurl.com/3v23fc9d> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 – Ethiopia, refworld, 2 July 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/hwp5mhyn> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ethiopia: Deteriorating human rights situation, OHCHR, 29 August 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/yk47wyfy> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ethnic Violence against Amhara People: the ECLJ Issues Urgent Letter to the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, ECLJ, 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/3zhj36zc> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ethiopia, freedom house, <https://tinyurl.com/26rx65y5> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)