A National Perspective on the Conflict in Gambella

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The western Gambella region is one the most conflict-ridden regions in Ethiopia. The paper identified five types of conflict: Inter-ethnic; intra-ethnic; indigenes and migrants; the state against ethnic groups, and cross-border conflicts. All these conflicts have distinctive local and regional roots but a comprehensive understanding of the conflict situation in the region entails linking them up with the national level dynamics. The paper explored this interface from five angles.

Introduction[2]

There are different groups of people who live in the Gambella region. According to the 1994 census, the region's population was estimated at 162,397.

Table 1. Population Distribution in the Gambella Region

Group	Urban	Percent	Rural	Percent	Total	Percent
"Indigenous" people						
Anywaa	9831	36%	34750	26%	44581	27%
Nuer	3014	11%	61459	45%	64473	40%
Majangir	64	0%	9286	7%	9350	6%
Opo and Komo	1067	4%	3735	3%	4802	3%
People from various highland areas of Ethiopia						
Amharas	4639	17%	7927	6%	12566	8%
SNNPR	1334	5%	12170	9%	13504	8%
Oromos	5890	22%	4635	3%	10525	6%
Tigrayans	1341	5%	1255	1%	2596	2%
Total	27180	100%	135217	100%	162397	100%

Source: Housing and Population Census, 1994

Although there are elements of reciprocity and complimentary socio-economic exchanges, the dominant pattern of inter-group relations in the region is conflict. Violent conflicts are expressed in various fields of social interaction: from villages to churches, from schools to political parties. The manifestation of violence ranges from the complete destruction of villages to rioting in the schools; from the targeting of minors and the raiding of public transports to the crucifixion of individuals in order to

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2 The data used in this paper is extracted from Anthropological fieldworks I conducted in the Gambella region during 2000/2002 and 2004/2006 as a member of the Department of Conflict and Integration, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/S.

humiliate the group to which they belong. In recent times, the conflict has assumed a more violent form involving bombings and massacres.

Levels of conflict

Inter-Ethnic Conflicts in the Gambella Region

There are different levels of conflict in the Gambella region. One of these is inter-ethnic. This is evident in the protracted conflict between the Anywaa and the Nuer, and between the Anywaa and the Majangir. The Anywaa-Nuer conflict is the most prominent of all conflicts in the region. It dates back to the second half of the 19th century when a section of the Nuer (Jikany) migrated to the east from southern Sudan. The main driving force of Nuer territorial expansion are access to and control over vital natural resources, cultivation and pasture lands along the tributaries of the Sobat. The Anywaa and the Nuer are variously positioned in the distribution of these key natural resources and they practice different livelihood. The Anywaa are predominantly cultivators while the Nuer make a living on livestock production, although they are increasingly becoming agro-pastoralists. Anywaa areas are better endowed with natural resources since their major settlements lie along the banks of the rivers with lower population densities. This land type covers less than one percent of the landmass of the region. The Nuer have accessed these lands in two ways. Where there is a major Anywaa settlement, Nuer clans ally through inter-marriage or military alliances with the local Anywaa; and where the Anywaa settlement is small, movement to these pastures is regulated by 'effective occupation' among the various Nuer clans. The resource-driven movements of the Nuer have resulted not only in their territorial but also demographic expansion. Radically formulated assimilationist society that it is, the Nuer have absorbed many Anywaa into their society. In some parts of mixed settlement areas processes of ethnic conversion (Anywaa becoming Nuer) is under way[3]. In the long term, this has meant the expansion of the Nuer cultural space as well. This is very much resented by the Anywaa who have constructed a different identity system that emphasizes territoriality and purity of blood[4].

Competition over scarce natural resources is compounded by struggle for political power at the regional level. Power struggle between Anywaa and Nuer elites started in the 1980s during the Derg period. On the basis of their settlement history, settlement pattern, greater competence in national culture and higher degree of education, the Anywaa elites expected a greater political advancement over their Nuer counterparts, which they didn't get. In fact, the Nuer managed to occupy the two key offices of administration and party secretariat. Early in the 1980s disgruntled Anywaa elites established a liberation movement known as the GPLM (Gambella People Liberation Movement) to fight the Derg regime. Allied with major armed groups (EPRDF and OLF), the Anywaa took control over the newly constituted Gambella regional state in 1991. The Nuer then felt marginalised and undertook an intense politics of recognition which resulted in violent conflicts between the two throughout the 1990s. There are at least three major violent conflicts between the two. The first occurred during the early years of the 1990s (1991-2) when militant section of the GPLM committed atrocity

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3   This is particularly true in the Jingmir area, located between Akobo and Nasser in present-day Luakpiny County in the Upper Nile State, Southern Sudan.
4   For a comprehensive analysis of the contrasting identity formations between the Anywaa and the Nuer, see Dereje, 2003. Ethnic Groups and Conflict: The Case of Anywaa and Nuer Relations in the Gambella Region, PHD Submitted to Martin Luther University, Germany.

against civilian Nuer in what appears ethnic reprisal. As a result, thousands of Ethiopian Nuer citizens trekked to the Sudan along with southern Sudanese refugees. From their bases in the Sudan, groups of armed Nuer mounted counter offensives, which resulted in the destruction of many Anywaa villages along the Baro River. The Nuer contestation of Anywaa political dominance resulted in yet another major war that broke out in Itang district in 1998. A more deadly conflict occurred in 2002 on issues related to succession to the office of the vice president. In post 1991 Gambella the office of the regional presidency is allocated to the Anywaa whereas the offices of the vice presidency and the secretary are allocated to the Nuer and the Majangir, respectively.

Intra-Ethnic Conflict

Intra-ethnic conflict in the Gambella region is evident in the regional cleavages among the Anywaa; party politics among the Majangir and the resource conflict among the Nuer clans. The main faulting line in Anywaa politics is the Lull/Openo divide, those who live along the Baro River and the forest region, respectively. Struggle for political power among the Anywaa is often framed in the language of Lull against Openo. There is also tension among the Majangir on issues related to political power within the MPDO (the Majangir People Political Organisation) and the divergent reactions of the Majangir to land encroachments by their neighbours. Power struggle within the MPDO is framed in terms of ethnic purity. Although political leaders are extracted from the dominant Meelanier clan, the leader of one of the factions is 'half Majangir'. The rivalry between the two factions burst into violent conflict during a sport tournament which the Majangir zone hosted in February 2007. The most intense intra-ethnic conflict is among the Nuer. This is expressed at two levels: political competition among the tribal and clan elites and the conflict over scarce natural resources among the villagers. The Nuer who live in the Gambella region (the Jikany) are divided into three tribes: The Gaajak, the Gaajok and the Gaaguang. The mode of political relation among the three tribes is competitive and at times very hostile. This is true particularly between the Gaajak and the Gaajok. The Gaajak resent the dominant political status of the Gaajok in the wider Nuer society particularly in Southern Sudan. On the basis of their larger demographic size in the Gambella region and a higher degree of incorporation into the Ethiopian state system, the Gaajak aspire a dominant status in Nuer politics in the regional state of Gambella. Intra-ethnic identity politics among the Nuer is also acted out in the emerging separate identity of the Thiang vis a vis the Gaajak.

There is also conflict over natural resources especially among the Gaajak clans. The resource-based conflict among the five Gaajak clans is a case in point. The Thiang occupy the best part of the rangeland. The permanent settlement of the Thiang in these lands deprived other Gaajak clans of their traditional avenues of expansion. Scarcity used to be addressed by the Nuer through a continual eastward expansion, mainly at the expense of Anywaa territories, where most of the dry season grazing lands and cultivation lands are found. An increase in population and a growing pressure on the riverine land, however, has generated competition over resources among the various Nuer clans, for they all compete for the same economic niche. Currently, there are intermittent conflicts between the Thiang and the two Gaajak sections, the Cieng Reng and the Cieng Nyajani on land-related issues.

Indigenes Vs Migrants

The Gambella region was incorporated into the Ethiopian state at the end of the 19th century. Prior to the arrival of the Ethiopian state, the region was inhabited by various groups of people who speak Nilotic and Koman languages. Today, they are survived by the Anywaa, the Nuer, the Majangir, the Opo and the Komo. Gambella is a lowland region that sharply contrasts the neighbouring western highlands. This is the reason why the migrants are called Highlanders. The first category of Highlanders who settled in Gambella is state officials and their families. Few traders followed suit. The bulk majority of the Highlanders who currently live in the Gambella region, however, came in the 1980s as part of the resettlement program. The introduction of coffee farming and timber production in the Majangir area has also encouraged new wave of migrants to the area. The 1990s saw yet another round of skilled migrants to the region. Given the fewer number of educated indigenous people, the newly constituted Gambella regional state encouraged educated Highlanders to come to the region and work as civil servants in the regional government. According the 1994 census, the Highlanders constitute 24% of the region's population and in some areas, particularly in the Majangir Zone and in the regional capital; they constitute more than 50% of the population.

There have been intermittent conflicts between the 'indigenes' and the 'migrants' in the past but the conflict has escalated since 1991. In 1992 more than 200 resettled Highlanders were killed in Ukuna village by armed Anywaa groups (Kurimoto, 1997). In the same year hundreds of Highlanders were massacred by armed groups led by the Nuer prophet Wutnyang. The Highlanders retaliated to both by indiscriminately killing 'black' people. Other than cultural differences, the boundary between the indigenes and the Highlanders is constructed in the language of colour. The 'black' indigenes are contrasted with the 'red' Highlanders. This social boundary is reinforced by a new political boundary. In post 1991 Ethiopia, the various groups of people who live in the Gambella region are accorded with different degrees of political entitlement. According to the regional constitution, sovereignty resides in the five 'indigenous' nationalities, also called by the federal government national minorities. The Highlanders do not fit into this classification scheme. They are of diverse ethnic origins. The category of Highlander is elastic to the extent that any non-Nilotic people with brown skin colour (red in local perception) wherever he/she is from considered as Highlander[5]. In terms of their ethnic identity, the majority of the resident Highlanders are ethnic Amhara, Oromo, Tigreans and Kembatta. In post 1991 political dispensation, the Highlanders emerge as a residual category because, by definition, they 'belong' to ethno-regional states other than Gambella on the basis of their respective ethnic identity. As a result, they do not have a political representation in the regional parliament despite their demographic size.

Despite their exclusion from the political process, the Highlanders dominate the business sector. They also provide more than 50 per cent of the skilled labour of the regional government although affirmative action has already produced a new generation of educated indigenous elite. Although the indigenous languages are promoted in the schools and are used as working language at the zonal and district administration level, Amharic is the working language of the regional government. Their better grasp of the language of the regional government has given the Highlanders an additional competitive edge in the skilled job market, if not in managerial positions and political

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5 The Highlanders are also variously called Habesha, Gaala, or Bouny.

offices, which are preserves of the indigenous elites. The sense of insecurity, however, seems to have generated an 'extractive' attitude, which above all is reflected in 'repatriation' of capital to 'homeland' regions. Amongst civil servants, the anxiety that they are likely to be replaced by the 'indigenes' sooner or later has generated a sense of apathy towards carrying out their professional responsibility. The Highlanders sense of relative deprivation is not only about their exclusion from political representation and economic insecurity but also what they consider lack of administrative justice. They see themselves as victims of 'local tyranny'[6].

The State Against Ethnic Groups

A fourth level of conflict is largely related to the political conflict and military confrontation between the EPRDF and armed groups of Anywaa. The Anywaa and the EPRDF were initially allies. In what appears a memorandum of understanding, the EPRDF promised the GPLM political power over the Gambella region in post-Derg Ethiopia. The Nuer then perceived siding with the Derg; the Anywaa appeared a 'natural ally' for the EPRDF. As an independent political organisation, however, the GPLM resisted EPRDF's hegemonic political behaviour. The EPRDF demilitarised the GPLM in 1992, transformed it into a party in 1995 and the leadership was replaced by 'user-friendly' members. In 1998 the EPRDF further imposed a merger between the GPLM and the Nuer-based party, the GPDUP (Gambella People Democratic Unity Party) and established a more docile regional umbrella organisation, the GPDF (Gambella People Democratic Front). This was resented, especially by the educated Anywaa who established an independent political organisation, the GPDC, Gambella People Democratic Congress. The GPDC seriously challenged the EPRDF-affiliated GPDF during the 2000 regional election. Despite GPDC's electoral gains in Anywaa polling stations, the result was rigged and GPDC got a marginal political representation in the regional council. The pragmatic political promotion of the Nuer by the EPRDF, on the other hand, brought a new round of political tension within the GPDF. The EPRDF dramatically increased the political representation of the Nuer in the regional council in what appears 'thanks-giving' to their contribution during the Ethio-Eritrean border conflict (1998-2000). This political tension escalated into the 2002 deadly conflict between the Anywaa and the Nuer.

The federal government took a series of political measures as part of 'conflict resolution'. Senior officials, including the Anywaa regional president, were imprisoned; members of the regional police who were accused of inciting and participating in the violence (largely Anywaa) were jailed or dismissed from their jobs; the contentious multi-ethnic district of Itang was abolished and parcelled out between the Nuer district of Jikow and the newly constituted Anywaa district of Openo-Alwero. The federal government has also identified the 'root causes' of the conflict situation in Gambella as the existence of 'too many' political parties. On that basis, all the existing parties were abolished in 2003 and were replaced by new ethnic parties modelled on EPRDF's PDOs (People Democratic organizations). These Gambella PDOs were organized by the EPRDF into a new umbrella political organization called the GPDM (Gambella People Democratic Movement)[7].

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6 Some leaders of the MPDO, for instance, are widely known for their power abuse, evident in their sexual exploitation of Highlander women in the job market. Many Highlanders describe their situation as 'humiliation': "the only way our daughters get a job is by sleeping with Majangir officials".

7 In a further political intervention, the EPRDF reorganized the GPDM in 2007 into the Gambella People Democratic Unity Movement (GPDUM).

The political measures taken by the federal government has alienated a large segment of Anywaa society. In fact, what is dabbed as 'Anywaa banditry' (shifta) that gradually evolved into an armed rebellion was largely organized activity of ex- Anywaa police who were dismissed from their jobs. Failing to sustain their own family and claiming to represent Anywaa discontent, they resorted to violence against not only government establishments but also civilian Highlanders. This is so because of the categorical association between the Highlanders and the Ethiopian state. In the discourse of color the Ethiopian state falls on the 'red' side of the color spectrum because state agents who come from the centre readily fall into the category of Highlanders. In September 2003 six road construction workers (Highlanders) were killed. This was followed by a series of indiscriminate killing of Highlanders. On December 13, 2003 Gambella town witnessed an extreme form of violence when the Highlanders resorted to mob violence against the Anywaa residents of Gambella town. The trigger was the killing of eight government officials (Highlanders) on the same day. The individuals who carried out the attack have reportedly never been caught but it was widely assumed both by the Highlanders and the government that the ambush was the work of an armed Anywaa group (Human Right Watch, 2005). Whoever killed them, the manner they were killed was brutal. The severely mutilated bodies were brought to the regional council for a public display before they were taken to the hospital. Assuming that the murder was committed by an Anywaa and agitated by the sensational display of the bodies of the murdered, the Highlanders indiscriminately killed Anywaa male residents of Gambella town with rocks, machetes, and pangas. Some members of the federal army deployed in the region, manned entirely by the Highlanders, participated in the killing with automatic weapons. Estimates of the casualty vary. Anywaa sources and international human right organizations put the death toll to 420 whereas the government acknowledged only 67.

A spiral of revenge killings followed this from both sides. Aggrieved by the complicity of the government establishments in the massacre, feeling vulnerable to more attacks and disappointed by the lack of protection from nor public apology by the government, more than a third of the Anywaa populace crossed the border to Southern Sudan where the various Anywaa armed groups were brought together and formed a politico-military organization known as the GPLF (Gambella People Liberation Front). From its base in Pochalla in Southern Sudan and the adjacent Anywaa territories on the Ethiopian side of the border, the GPLF has fought with the Ethiopian army with various degrees of success. The existing political tension between the Anywaa and the EPRDF is further compounded by the prospect of the discovery of strategic resources in the Gambella region and the issue of economic control related to that. The Gambella basin is one of the major petroleum potential areas in Ethiopia. Currently a Malaysian oil company, Petronas, is undertaking exploration over the entire expanse of the Basin.

Cross-Border Conflicts

A different level of conflict in the Gambella region is cross-border incursions. This is related to large-scale cross-border cattle raiding and the associated loss of human lives from the attacks by the Lou Nuer and the Murle from Southern Sudan. The Lou Nuer cross-border incursions dates back to 1993 and continued until 2006. They displaced Ethiopian Nuer residents of Akobo district and occupied more than seventeen villages. The Murle cross-border cattle-raiding have been around for long time but it has dramatically increased for the last two years as far as areas hitherto were not raided.

These repeated cattle raiding have cost the lives of many people, loss of thousands of cattle and produced massive internally displaced people. Whatever the reasons for the escalation of the Murle cattle raiding might be one thing is certain: None of the villages attacked got support from any of the military establishments in the region. Nor has the Federal government responded to the plea despite the existence of constitutional provisions for a federal intervention.

Community leaders and the various levels of the regional government have appealed to the federal government to put an end to the havoc the Murle are raking on the Anywaa and Nuer pastoralist communities. Despite the deployment of a sizeable federal army in the region with a principal mandate of giving protection to the oil company located near to the villages subjected to the raids, none of the local communities got the protection they badly needed. Rebuffed by the federal army and the regional government, a number of people have fled the region and crossed the border to southern Sudan hoping that they would be safer near the SPLA (Southern Sudanese Liberation Army). Although the effectiveness of the SPLA in 'disciplining' the Murle remains to be seen, its political will to deliver the protection the people seek could have a legitimating effect on the SPLA's latent claim over the Gambella region and its 'black' people. Some of the disaffected local elites are now making sense of the prevailing insecurity through a conspiratorial scheme of interpretation. The inaction of the federal government is made intelligible as a subtle yet cost effective means of displacing the local population from the oil exploration areas.

The National Perspective on the Conflict in the Gambella Region

Undoubtedly, the various levels of conflict and the objects of the struggle have local roots and reflect regional dynamics. These conflicts, however, have also a national dimension. In the following the paper makes sense of the conflict situation in the Gambella region in national terms from five angles.

The Question of the Political Ownership of the Regional States

The Ethiopian constitution refers to 'nations, nationalities and peoples', without spelling out their differences and which group of people are recognized as what. According to the Soviet theory of the 'nationality question', which EPRDF apparently draws on, a nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture (Armstrong, 1977). In the competition to dominate the new political space ethnic groups are variously positioned according to the degree of their 'localness'. This is so not only because of differences in settlement history, settlement pattern, demography and differential degree of incorporation to the national centre but also because of the lack of a standard in the politics off entitlement at the national level. One has to read between the lines to get a feel of the modus operadi of the post 1991 political structure. Which particular ethnic group is qualified for which political status is not explicitly formulated. The haphazard use of these terms to the various groups by the ruling party gives an impression that demographic size is a defining criterion. The five regional states, which are designated as 'mother states' to the five largest ethnic groups, suggests that. But the allocation to the Harari a regional state, one of the smallest ethnic groups, adds complexity to the terminological confusion and reveals what Vaughan (2003) said a 'constitutional oddity'. The remaining three regional states are designated as multi-ethnic in which the various groups of people are competing for a dominant

status. These multi-ethnic regional states are the GPNRS, the SNNPRS (Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Regional State) and BGPNRS (Benishangul-Gumuz Peoples National Regional State).

Political entitlement in these multi-ethnic regional states is determined by EPRDF's pragmatism than a political practice informed by ideological rigor. This has introduced fluctuating power relations among the competing groups. It is this ambiguous political structure, which raises expectations and ultimately results in the disappointment of groups such as the Anywaa. On the basis of settlement history which accrues the Anywaa a senior position, the indigenous people in their perspective, and contribution to the regime change, mimicking EPRDF's ideology of power, the Anywaa elites aspired and moved towards claiming the GPNRS as an Anywaa regional state at best or a political majority minimum. In the eye of the Anywaa this is a legitimate demand. Should the Amhara, Tigreans, Oromo or the Afar are allocated a regional state in their respective 'homelands' so do the Anywaa deserve the same political right over a region which they regard as their home or at least a dominant political status in a region which is defined multi-ethnic. Situated in this national political context, the radical formulation of the Anywaa ownership claim over the GPNRS makes sense. It is no wonder then that what is considered as 'equitable' power sharing arrangement by the federal government that aims at addressing the issue of proportional political representation is often interpreted by the Anywaa as the usurpation of their legitimate dominant political status.

Institutionalised Identity Politics and Politicisation of Migration

In the political tension between Nilotic indigenes and the migrant Highlander what we are observing is the reflection of the disjunction between constitutional theory and political practice in a local setting. The architects of the Constitution seem to have designed Ethiopia to be a multi-nation, not multi-ethnic federal state. The literature on constitutional law defines multi-nation federation as inclusive in as much as membership to a certain nation or nationality is on the basis of cultural competence and place of residence. Ethnic federalism on the other hand takes biological descent as the criteria of membership (Assefa, 2005). The new political structure laid by the EPRDF is often described in the literature as ethnic federalism (Alem, 2003; Aalen, 2002; Turton, 2005). The relevant clause is Art.39/5 of the constitution: "a nation, nationality or peoples are group of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in common or related identities, a common psychological make up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory". This article does not include the requirement of common descent in the definition of a group. As Affefa (ibid) noted "in form we can forcefully argue that an Oromo who prefers to stay in Gambella or Benishangul has the right to do so and vice versa. What is required to know is the state official language and not to descend from any of the indigenous languages". According to this line of reasoning, the exclusion of the Highlanders from the political process in the GPNRS becomes doubly 'unconstitutional'. For one thing, the working language of the regional government is Amharic, which the Highlanders are fluent in. Some Highlanders, particularly long time residents, are also competent in the local languages but none of the indigenous political parties have embraced these hybrid social categories, let alone to allow the political representation of the Highlanders either as a group by their own right or on the basis of their ethnic identity. A similar contradiction in the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state has caused a political tension and conflict between the

Highlanders and the indigenes (Young, 1999). Unlike in Gambella, however, the Highlanders in BGPNRS claimed their 'constitutional' right to participate in the region's political process. Towards that end, they appealed to the House of Federation and the latter ruled that for any Ethiopian to elect or to be elected what the constitution requires is the two/five year residence requirement plus the knowledge of the official language of the region and not the knowledge of the language of the local vernaculars. The House found an earlier decision of the Election Board as well as the practice of the regional government unconstitutional (ibid). Instead of settling the issue of political representation constitutionally or amending the constitution to address such contradictions, EPRDF's political practice is heavily informed by situational pragmatism than a negotiated settlement to this vexing political problem. This ambiguous political structure has created a conflict situation between 'natives' and 'outsiders', particularly in the multi-ethnic regional states such as the GPNRS where old 'national minorities' are pitied against new 'regional minorities'.

The repercussion of institutionalised identity politics does not end at the inter-ethnic and indigenes/migrants level. It has also ushered in social fragmentation within the ethnic groups magnifying and politicising sub-ethnic units of identification. The Lul/Openo divide among the Anywaa; the purity issue among the Majangir and the inter/intra-tribal political competitions among the Nuer are manifestations of the janus-faced nature of the post-1991 identity politics in Ethiopia. On the one hand, identity politics has reinforced inter-ethnic boundary and fostered intra-ethnic solidarity. But the same process has also raised problems of where to draw the line in the definition of the 'self' and engendered intra-ethnic competition for political power and resources.

Contradictions in Ethiopia's Federalism
Ethiopian federalism, like its Nigerian and Indian counterparts, exhibits strong centralising features (Bahargava, 2006; Suberu, R. 2006). This is manifest in its fiscal policy which makes the States virtually dependant on the federal for their financial wherewithal (Keller, 2002) as well as the political structure in which the ruling party controls governance issues in the States through member parties or affiliates (Aalen, 2002). The Ethiopian federal variant needs to account for this paradox more than its Nigerian or Indian counterparts because its constitution generously provides for the States political autonomy and control over their resources. In fact, the Ethiopian constitution has gone extra miles in catering to the States autonomy including and up to secession.

The trouble between the GPLM and the EPRDF; between the GPDF/EPRDF and the GPDC makes sense if it is filtered through this apparent political contradiction. Underlying the problem is the hegemonic aspiration of the EPRDF and the challenges it has faced in areas particularly where there are independent or semi-autonomous political organisations. Various scholars have noted that EPRDF is no loner in its projects of control. It is in good company with the political regimes that preceded it (Clapham, 2006; Merara, 2006). All political regimes in Ethiopia, from imperial, Derg to EPRDF, are 'control frick'. Perhaps where they differ is in the degree of success in their projects of total control over society. This political culture, a feudal legacy, is refined by the Derg and the EPRDF with the appropriation of the Leninist variety of socialism, in which political control is justified on the basis of the need to have a 'vanguard party' to lead a social revolution[8]. Seizing power in 'post-socialist' era, the

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8 Article 6 of the 1977 Soviet constitution refers to the party as the 'leading and guiding force of Soviet

EPRDF wedded the idea of the vanguard party with a more ideologically obscure revolutionary democracy. What these ideologies have in common is that they are code words for the same: total control over society. The drive towards political control contravenes one of the tenets of federalism; political pluralism. The EPRDF and its affiliate political organisations have abundantly made intolerance to political pluralism clear both in the 2000 and 20005 regional elections. Backed by the EPRDF, the GPDF resorted to political repression instead of competing to win the minds and hearts of the people in a levelled electoral playing field. Labelling the GPDC leadership as 'narrow nationalists', GPDF legitimated its violent exclusion of a regional opposition party from the political process.

The Centre-Periphery Relational Dynamics in Ethiopia

The current issue of citizenship insecurity in the Gambella region expressed in the form of lack of government protection from cross-border incursions is reminiscent of the general pattern the way the Ethiopian national centre has related to its periphery. Across various political regimes the periphery such as Gambella is principally regarded as a place where the centre could extract different kinds of resources, from economic, political to ideological (James and Donham, 1985). The EPRDF has brought a new spin on the centre-periphery mode of relation to the extent that a new peripheral political space is created evident in the creation of four regional states; the GPNRS, the BGPNRS, the Afar regional state, the Somali regional state and the affirmative actions connected to that. The basic mode of relation, however, has remained unchanged. This perennial peripheral attitude is informed by a number of factors. One is related to history. The Ethiopian state had its origin in the North-centre part of the country with a core culture that combines Amharic language, Orthodox religion, and Semitic ideology of power (the so-called Solomonic dynasty). Attempts have been made to redefine this national fabric, first by the Derg and more substantially by the EPRDF. A lot remains to be desired, though, before the Ethiopian centre changes its peripheral attitude. The demographic structure of the country also factor into the relational mode. The combined population of the four peripheral regional states constitutes only 7.8% of the country's population. In that sense, they do not count as 'significant others' in the national power game. The cross-border settlement pattern of the population of these regions also comes into the equation. Their settlement pattern straddling Ethiopia's border with its belligerent neighbours, politics in these regions is either held hostage to geo-politics or their political aspirations is securitized. The colour dimension in Ethiopian national identification further compounds the problem. Government political practice is still informed by the discourse on colour, as if the blacker one is the 'less Ethiopian' he becomes. The social, economic and political discriminations, which the discourse of colour signifies, have greatly undermined the borderlanders' sense of belonging to Ethiopian national identity. Reacting to this peripheral attitude of the Ethiopian centre they have variously identified with alternative national identities across the border where they aspire to be 'first-class citizens'.

III.5 Natural Resource Scarcity and the Extensive Production Regime

There is a general pattern nation-wide of addressing natural resource scarcity through extensive production. This is done either at the expense of the environment or neighbours. More and more new forest lands are being cleared every year. An

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society and the nucleus of its political system, of all state organizations and public organizations.

increasing number of people from resource-poor regions migrate to resource-rich regions and encroach into their neighbour's land, only to reproduce the same cycle of scarcity in the long run. In Gambella, resource-based conflicts such as Anywaa-Nuer, inter-clan conflicts among the Nuer clans and Majangir-Highlanders are related to the strategy of coping with scarcity. Government development policy also espouses the extensive production regime, evident in the drive towards the controversial resettlement program[9].

As it stands, the Gambella region in general and the Majangir Zone in particular is suffering from the Malthusian effect, the link between population pressure and environmental degradation. Under normal circumstances the link should not be necessarily negative. In fact, there is a possibility that population pressure and resource scarcity could be the source of innovation, which can spur economic growth. The intervening variable is the use of improved agricultural technology. As the number of people within an area rises, the demand for production on that unit of land increases.

Scarcity of natural resources could also be addressed through diversification of livelihoods. One of the prominent features of the Gambella economy is the conspicuous absence of the indigenes from the business sector. Coming from relatively more developed regions, with wider social networks and an entrepreneurial culture, the Highlanders dominate the business sector in the Gambella region. However, the Highlanders become dominant economically, differential accumulation of economic power has created a potential for conflict in the context of politicisation of migration. The indigenes regard the economic success of the Highlanders with consternation, which echoes the political closure, 'Gambella is for the Gambellans''. Ways should be explored to create a new economic space for the indigenes such as enhancing cross-border trade in which they will have comparative advantages with their social networks that straddle the border. Decoupling economic life chances from social identity goes a long way in fostering multiple identities and creating crosscutting ties.

Concluding remarks

The paper discussed the various levels of conflict in reference to the wider political process at the national level. The struggle for political power among the ethnic elites is a reflection of the contentious issue of political ownership of the multi-ethnic regional states such as Gambella. It seems that the political structure that ethnic federalism is built on is designed in reference to the so-called five 'mother states' where a single ethnic group is politically in charge. The multi-ethnic regional states are 'up for grab' for the various groups who compete for political power and resources with various narratives of entitlement instead of building a viable regional political community. The conflict situation in the Gambella region is also related to the introduction of territorialized ethnicity and the politicisation of migration that followed this. The creation of territorially bounded ethno-political units is colliding with the facts on the ground, a heterogeneous regional population which is kept dynamic by the continuous population movement across the political boundaries. Examining the current conflict between the EPRDF and armed groups of Anywaa brings us to another national level dynamics; the contradiction between a highly acclaimed project of decentralisation based on a generous constitutional provision for self government on the one hand and

9   As part of EPRDF's 'New Coalition for Food Security in Ethiopia', the government has launched a large scale resettlement program since 2003 with the objective to enable 2.2 million chronically food insecure people to attain food security.

infringement of regional autonomy on the other. Unless Ethiopia's ethnic federalism accommodates political pluralism it is likely that the conflict situation will prevail. The interface between the regional and national level conflict dynamics also reflects the continuity of the centre-periphery relational mode. The Ethiopian centre has always related to its periphery in a predatory way. This is not only because of the geographic distance but also the historical, social and cultural differences which the discourse on skin colour signifies.

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