

The (mis)management of ethno-linguistic diversity in Ethiopian cities

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Abstract

Ethiopia has an ethnic federal system that is based on the assumption that the ethnolinguistic communities of the country are located in neatly defined, or definable, territorial areas. On the basis of this assumption the federal system aspires to accommodate the ethnic diversity of the Ethiopian people through, principally, if not exclusively, territorial schemes. This assumption is, however, incorrect as far as urban areas are concerned which, despite being territorially enclosed within one of the ethnic-based regions or sub-regional units, have thousands of multi-ethnic dwellers. The territorial scheme thus fails to cater to a large contingent of multi-ethnic urban dwellers.

Introduction

States with population of diverse ethnic or cultural identities use territorial and non-territorial methods for managing the diversity of their population. The territorial management of diversity, which takes different forms, including federalism or regionalism, presupposes the recognition of a certain territorial area as an autonomous sub-national unit of a particular identity group. This method has been adopted for managing diversity or accommodating minorities in multiethnic and multi-lingual states such as Ethiopia, Switzerland, Canada, Belgium and the like.

The territorial method of managing diversity, however, fails to cater for urban population, which is often ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous. Cities are built around 'economic logic' rather than cultural affinity or 'political legitimacy through ethnic membership', making them multi-linguistic, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural (Qadeer, 1997). Thus, states that use territorial methods for managing diversity are often faced with the risk of marginalising minorities living in urban areas within ethnically structured subnational units. This is the case, for instance, in Canada where the recognition of Quebec as the autonomous region of the French-speaking community came at the risk of marginalising the English-speaking community living in cities such as Montreal and Quebec City (Vaillancourt, Coche, Cadieux, & Ronson, 2012). In Spain, the accommodation of diverse linguistic communities in cities such as Barcelona (the capital of the autonomous regions of Catalonia), Vitoria-Gasteiz (the capital of Basque Country) and Santiago de Compostela (the capital of Galicia) is often at issue. Belgium

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