

The political and cultural inclusion of intra-state ethnic minorities in Ethiopia: The case of the Qimant of Amhara state

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Abstract

Conflicts between the Qimant community – an intra-state minority ethnic group endogenous to Amhara state in the Ethiopian federation – and the state's special police forces have caused hundreds of deaths and the internal displacement of close to 50,000 people. Linked to these conflicts are the Qimants' demands for recognition as a distinct ethnic community and the establishment of local government in the territories they inhabit; demands which have not received a satisfactory response from the federal or Amhara state government and which officials view with disdain. The situation raises several questions. Do the federal and regional-state constitutions provide the necessary framework for accommodating intra-state ethnic minorities such as the Qimant? If they do, why have the two levels of government failed to resolve the Qimant issue peacefully? What institutional mechanisms could they have used to satisfy the demands of the Qimant community? This article seeks to answer these and related questions.

INTRODUCTION

For the last five years or so, the central and western parts of Gondar – a region in the northwest of Amhara state in the Ethiopian federation – have been the site of deadly inter-communal conflict. The parties to the conflict are the state's 'special police force',¹ members of the Qimant community – an intra-state minority ethnic group endogenous to the state – and an Amhara youth movement known as the Fanno which is operating in the area. The conflict is linked to the Qimants' demands for recognition as a distinct ethnic community and for the establishment of ethnicity-based local government in the territories they inhabit. These demands have not received a satisfactory response from officials at either the federal or Amhara regional-state

level, who view them with disdain. This, in turn, has led to violent (often gruesome) inter-communal conflict in which hundreds of people (mainly from the Qimant community) have been killed or wounded, close to 50,000 people internally displaced, and nearly 4,000 houses burned to the ground.

The situation raises several questions. Do the federal and regional-state constitutions provide the necessary framework for accommodating intra-state ethnic minorities such as the Qimant? If they do, why have the two levels of government failed to resolve the Qimant issue peacefully? What institutional mechanisms could they have used to satisfy the demands of the Qimant community? This article seeks to answer these and related questions. The argument it makes is that the Qimants' demands for recognition and local self-government have their basis in the 1995 Constitution of Ethiopia (FDRE, 1995) and that the conflict could have been averted or minimized if regional-state and federal officials had responded affirmatively and in a timely fashion to what are constitutionally legitimate demands.

The article is divided into six sections including this introduction. The second section presents a theoretical discussion of territorial and non-territorial institutional options for accommodating intra-state minority communities such as the Qimant. The third introduces the Ethiopian federal system and explains how and why it is conceptualized as an ethnic federal system and how it seeks to manage ethnic diversity at the federal and state levels. The fourth section, which is the substantive part of the article, deals briefly with the history of the Qimant community before describing efforts made by members of this community to secure recognition and local self-government and the ways in which federal and Amhara state officials (mis)handled the matter. The fifth provides a snapshot of recent political developments in Ethiopia and Amhara state and their consequences for the Qimant. The article ends with a number of concluding remarks.

Methodologically, this paper is based on both desk research and fieldwork. The field data were collected between June 2015 and June 2020 by means of interviews with key informants, including Amhara state officials, members of the Qimant community, and members of the Ethiopian House of Federation (see Appendix).

ACCOMMODATING ETHNIC MINORITIES: TERRITORIAL AND NON-TERRITORIAL OPTIONS

The majority-minority distinction, be it in respect of ethnicity, culture or religion, is based on two considerations, namely: the numerical size and the political weight of a community relative to that of the rest of the country's population (Casals, 2006: 20).² In general, a group of people comprising more than 50% of a country's population is considered the majority while the rest is in the minority (Wheatley, 2005: 19). A community which is numerically in the minority, however, may be in the majority in the second sense if it enjoys political dominance at the national level. Under apartheid, for instance, the white population of South Africa was for this reason regarded as the majority, despite being numerically inferior to the black population. For an ethnic community to be considered a minority, then, it has to be both numerically inferior to other ethnic groups and have no political weight (*ibid.*). Where there is no ethnic community with a numerical majority – which is the case in many African countries – each may be regarded as a minority unless one of them has political dominance.

As Ramaga (1992) notes, 'the minority concept' is a relative one, in that a community which is in the minority at the national level could be in the majority at the sub-national level. This is the case, for instance, with French-speakers in Quebec and Catalans in Catalonia, who are each a national minority but a regional majority. Likewise, a community in the majority at the national level could be in the minority at the sub-national level. Cases in point are English-speakers in Quebec, Spanish-speakers in Catalonia, Italian-speakers in South Tyrol, and

Flemish-speakers in Wallonia (Deschouwer, 2005: 49; Ghai, 2000: 3; Henders, 2010). An ethnic community might also be a 'double minority' in the sense that it is both a national and sub-national minority. Such a community (for example, Cree-speakers in Quebec and Aran-speakers in Catalonia) may be in the minority in a particular region, state, canton or province amidst another national minority which is dominant in that area (Patten, 2004: 138). These examples highlight that the minority concept is always relative, especially in federal or federal-type systems that grant sub-national governments the power to make decisions which impact on minority communities within their territorial jurisdiction. This is a consideration that brings to the fore the notion of intra-state, intra-provincial or intra-regional minorities.

Various institutional methods exist for accommodating minorities, including intra-state minorities. The pertinence of a given method depends on, among other things, the community's political and cultural demands, the intensity with which it asserts them, and the question of whether it inhabits a defined or definable territorial area (Coakley, 2003). The institutional options can be divided broadly into non-territorial and territorial ones. Non-territorial methods are especially useful for accommodating territorially dispersed ethnic, cultural or religious groups in heterogeneous countries or regions (Ramaga, 1992; Wheatley, 2005: 108). These methods range from what is called 'the individual approach' to providing full cultural autonomy to a minority ethnic community (Henrard, 2001).

The individual approach uses human rights regimes to ensure that individual members of a minority community enjoy equal social and economic opportunities to the rest of the population, and does so without necessarily giving special recognition and status to the community as a whole. This method could be sufficient when the demands of members of a minority community are limited to equal treatment and non-discrimination.

In some cases, a minority community may seek recognition as a distinct ethno-cultural community and institutional accommodation of its cultural distinctiveness without, however, making demands for territorial self-determination. In such cases, conferring cultural autonomy can be a useful non-territorial method of accommodating the community. The aim thereof is to protect and promote the language, culture, and religion of a minority community through 'non-political' institutions such as special schools and museums (Coakley, 2003: 7). A number of countries have used this approach for accommodating territorially dispersed cultural communities (Coakley, 1994, 2003; Lapidoth, 1994: 280).

In other cases, a minority community (including a sub-state minority) might be politically mobilized to demand 'institutional political recognition' in the form of internal self-determination. This is precisely what the Qimant community is demanding. In such cases, the territorial option becomes indispensable. This is a scheme which provides a national or sub-national minority community with territorial autonomy and 'a certain degree of self-determination' through the establishment of a local or regional government in the local or regional area where it constitutes the majority (Wheatley, 2005: 107; Wolff, 2011). Federalism or regional autonomy is often used to provide territorial autonomy to minority ethno-cultural communities (Deschouwer, 2005; Fleiner & Fleiner, 1996; Osaghae, 2004). Local government established on the basis of ethnic criteria can also be used to provide a sub-state cultural community with territorial autonomy.

Various states with both unitary and federal systems have used local territorial units such as municipalities to manage ethnic diversity at different times. For example, in Hungary's Act LXXVII of 1993 on the Rights of Nationalities and Ethnic Minorities, Article 5 (91) allowed ethnic minorities to establish self-government and enjoy territorial autonomy at the local level (Hungary, 1993). A local unit is considered a 'minority local government' if the majority of its residents belong to a particular minority ethnic community; this is described as 'a form of territorial autonomy' at the local level (Teller, 2007: 74). Local government is also used to accommodate Serb minorities in Kosovo (Monteux, 2006), while in Belgium it accommodates minority ethnic Germans (Benedikter, 2009; Deschouwer, 2005).

Municipalities are likewise used for the territorial management of linguistic diversity in some multilingual cantons in Switzerland, among them the trilingual canton of Garison where one finds ‘small Romansh-speaking Protestant as well as Catholic municipalities and German-speaking Protestant as well as Catholic municipalities side by side within a small area’ (Fleiner & Fleiner, 1996). Likewise, municipalities in South Africa and counties in Kenya have been used to ensure the cultural and political inclusion of marginalized communities (Ayele & Ntliziywana, 2015).

THE ETHIOPIAN FEDERAL SYSTEM AND THE MANAGEMENT OF ETHNIC DIVERSITY

Formerly a unitary state that claimed to be a nation-state despite having more than 80 ethnic communities, in 1995 Ethiopia adopted a multinational federal system with the promulgation of a new Constitution (FDRE, 1995). The country’s journey towards federalism began in 1991 when the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) assumed power after militarily ousting the Derg, the socialist junta which had ruled the country from 1974 to 1991.³ The EPRDF had raised arms to champion the cause of ethnic communities that had suffered political and cultural marginalization under the previous regime, and in July 1991 (only a month after it took control of the capital, Addis Ababa) it sponsored a Transitional Period Charter (TPC) and a Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE).

The TPC’s Preamble not only recognized the right to self-determination of each ethnic community – or ‘nation, nationality, and people’, as ethnic communities are referred to in the TPC – but also enshrined this as the ‘governing political principle’ of the country. This principle was to find expression in Article 2(b), which granted each ethnic community the right to administer its own affairs within the territory it inhabited and to participate in the central government (Negarit Gazeta, 1991). An ethnic community’s right to self-determination included the option to secede from the country and declare its own independent state if it so chose.⁴ The TPC further provided in Article 13 that the boundaries of the regional and local units would be demarcated on the basis of geographical settlement patterns. Accordingly, the TGE adopted Proclamation No. 7, which identified 63 territorially-concentrated ethnic communities and declared 47 of them capable of self-government, starting at the *woreda* (district) level (Negarit Gazeta, 1992).

Woredas where the majority of the residents belonged to a specific ethnic community were amalgamated to form regional or sub-regional self-governing areas of a specific ethnic community (Abraham, 1994: 26). Consequently, during the Transitional Period, a de facto ethnic federal system was established which was later entrenched with the adoption of the 1995 Constitution. The latter reconceptualizes Ethiopia as a ‘federation of ethnic groups’ in which the various ethnic communities are assumed to have ‘joined together in a federal union’ (Herther-Spiro, 2007); a state ‘founded by and belong[ing] to all ethnic groups’ (Bihonegn, 2015; Gebre-Sellasie, 2003). The right to self-determination of all the ethnic communities of the country became the foundational principle of the federal system. Under this system, each ethnic community – its population and territorial size notwithstanding – hence has the right to exercise self-rule within the territory it inhabits (FDRE, 1995: Article 39).

The Constitution establishes nine states (FDRE, 1995: Article 47). These are: Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambela, Harari, Oromia, the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples (SNNP), Somali, and Tigray (see Figure 1). Two additional states were also recently added: Sidama and the South-West. None of the states is ethnically homogeneous. Five of the states (Amhara, Afar, Oromia, Somali, and Tigray) have an ethnic community which is in the majority and whose name they bear. These states also have several intra-state ethnic minorities, some territorially concentrated and others dispersed. Three states are multi-ethnic

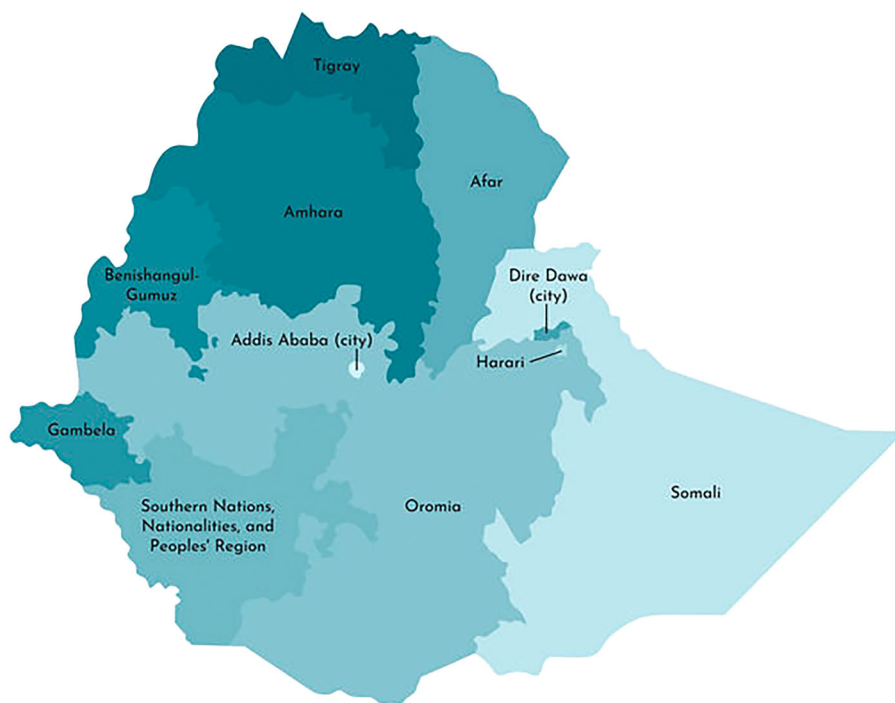


FIGURE 1 Administrative map of Ethiopia. *Source:* 123rf.com. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

with no single ethnic community in the majority. Harari, a city-state, is a peculiar case in that it was established for the Harari community, which, paradoxically, is in the minority in the state.

Article 47 of the new Constitution (FDRE, 1995) provides two ways for accommodating intra-state minorities. The first is territorial autonomy in the form of ethnic local government within the existing states;⁵ the second is for the ethnic community to secede from the state wherein it resides and establish its own state. In Amhara state, where more than 90% of the state population identify as Amhara, there are four recognized minorities: the two Agew-speaking communities (Agew Himra and Agew Awi), the Wollo Oromo, and the Argoba community (Ayele, 2014). These communities are also allowed to enjoy political autonomy by establishing self-government at the local level (*ibid.*). Now the Qimant are demanding recognition as the fifth intra-state minority in Amhara state and their own local government – demands which, as already noted, are the root cause of the current conflict in the state.

THE QIMANTS AND THEIR QUEST FOR RECOGNITION AND SELF-GOVERNMENT

A brief history of the Qimants

Historically, the Qimant community is considered a sub-group of the Agew nation. According to the American anthropologist Gamst (1984), the Qimant are among the endogenous inhabitants of the northwestern part of Ethiopia. Their historical homeland stretched from Lake Tana – the source of the River Abay (Blue Nile) – in the south to Tikel Dingay in the north, and from western Wegera in the east to eastern Quara in the west (*ibid.*). Currently, they are found

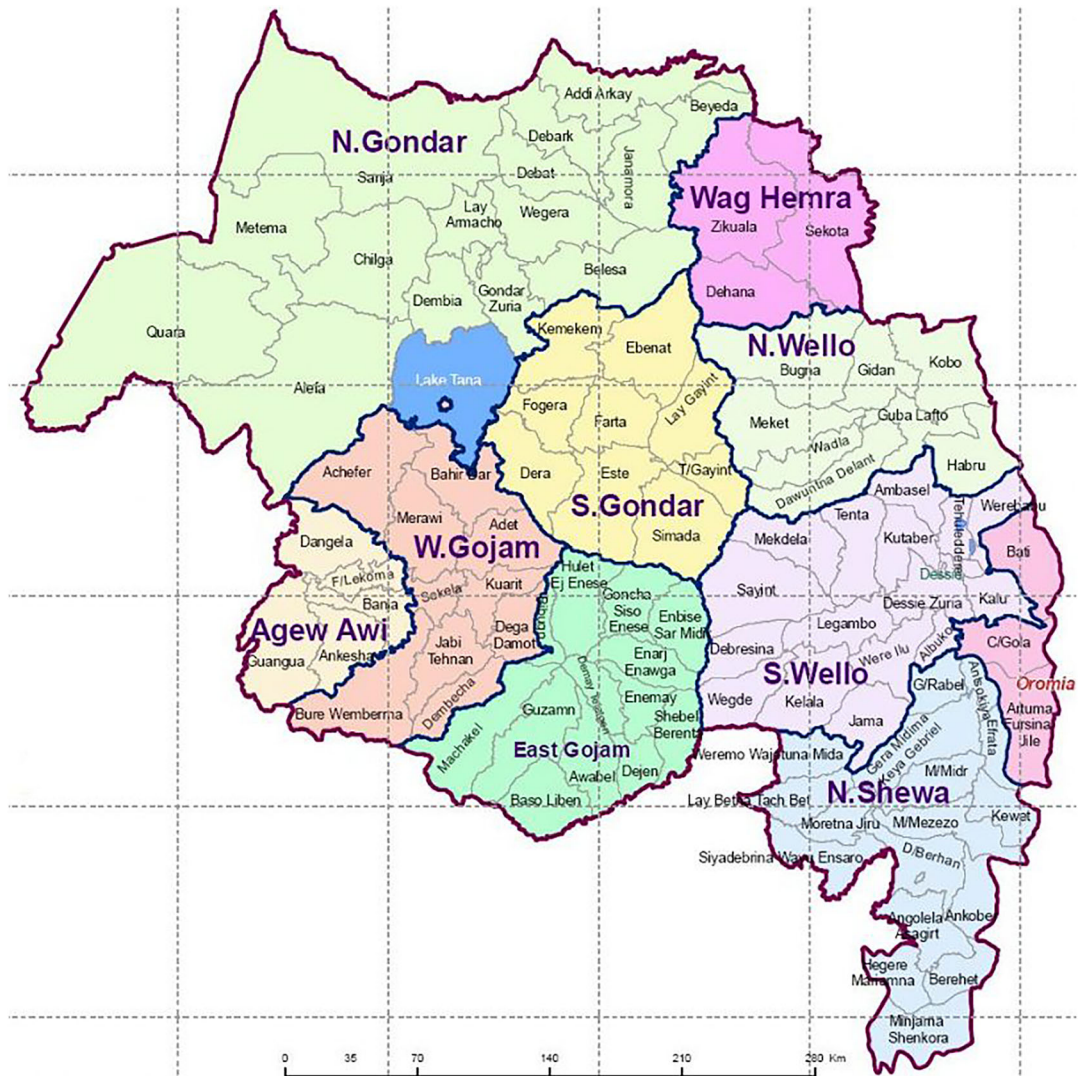


FIGURE 2 Administrative division of Amhara state. Source: 123rf.com. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

mainly in western and central Gondar, the northwestern administrative zone of Amhara state (Interview with an anonymous member of the Coordinating Council, Gondar, July 2017). The area they inhabit today stretches from Ayikel in Chilga *woreda* to Kerakir, north of Lake Tana, including *woredas* such as La’y Armachiho, Quara, parts of Dembiya, Metemma, and Wegera (see Figure 2).

A myth among the Qimant community is that they are the descendants of ancient Israelites who migrated to Ethiopia to escape drought and famine (Belay, 2014: 159; Interview with Nega Gete, Gondar, July 2017). According to Belay (ibid.), the name Qimant derives from the term ‘*kemä-ent*’, meaning ‘You Kam’, or ‘You Kamatic’; the Qimant thus believe that they are the descendants of Kam, son of Noah, and regard themselves as ‘the people of Kam’.

Like many other historical ethno-national minorities in the country, the Qimant have for centuries borne the brunt of severe discrimination and prejudice (Interview with Nega Gete,

Gondar, 2017). Liyew (2000) maintains that they experienced phases of stigmatization, exclusion, and forced assimilation into Amhara culture – a victimization that began in earnest with the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty in the thirteenth century⁶ and continues to this day in one form or another. The stigma attached to being a Qimant forced many of them to abandon their identity and assume the Amhara identity in its place (Belay, 2013: 217; Liyew, 2000: 46–51). Many abandoned their ancient Hebrew religion and converted to Orthodox Christianity, or avoided speaking in Qimantey (their native language) or manifesting any identity marker associated with being Qimant, to the extent that today Qimantey is on the verge of extinction.

This process of assimilation was briefly halted during the reign of Emperor Tewodros II (1855–1868), as he had friendly relations not only with the political and religious leaders of the Qimant but also with several members of their wider community (Belay, 2013). This was because he received strong support from them when he spent time as a rebel leader in Quara, Chilga, and La'y Armachiho (northwestern Gondar), where the majority of the Qimant community live. The assimilation of the Qimant into Amhara culture resumed when Emperor Yohannes IV (1872–1889) ascended the throne after the death of Tewodros. This emperor – a Tigrayan and ardent Orthodox Christian who made it his life's mission to convert the country's non-Christian communities, even if by force (Zwide, 2002) – sought to do away with the Qimants' 'Pagan-Hebraic' religion and convert them to Christianity.

Assimilation continued long after the death of Emperor Yohannes right up until the Derg abolished the monarchy in 1974. In the national census carried out in 1984 (see TGE, 1991), the socialist military junta officially recognized the Qimant as a distinct ethnic community. However, it took no practical steps to protect their fundamental rights and freedoms (or those of any of the country's ethnic communities, for that matter), nor to promote the Qimant language, religion, and culture. Hence, the Qimant community was barely visible as a distinct ethnic group when the EPRDF assumed power in 1991 in the name of establishing a system based on recognizing the right to self-determination of Ethiopia's ethnic communities (Interview with Molla Jember, Addis Ababa, June 2017).

Indeed, the national censuses of 1984 and 1994 show that the Qimant had a population of 169,169 and 172,291, respectively (FDRE–CSA, 1995; TGE, 1991). However, fewer than 1% of them spoke Qimantey, and many of these were found close to Ayikel, where Wenber (the community's religious and political leader) was based (Liyew, 2000: 31, Yirga, 2016). Most of the children of the Qimant community prefer to speak and learn in the Amharic language even before starting school, which is why Qimantey is regarded as one of Ethiopia's endangered languages today. Likewise, adherence to the traditional religion of the Qimant community has declined substantially, as most members of the community have converted to Orthodox Christianity over the years (*ibid.*).

Mobilization of the Qimants for recognition and self-government

As already stated, Proclamation No. 7 issued by the TPC (Negarit Gazeta, 1992) listed 63 groups which were recognized as distinct ethnic communities. The list was based on research by the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities, an organization established by the Derg in the 1980s which made an extensive study of the country's ethnic communities. The Qimant community did not appear on this list, however, despite the fact that it had been counted as a distinct ethnic community in the 1984 national census (TGE, 1991). Thus, when the country was reconfigured along ethnic lines, the Qimant received neither recognition as an ethnic community nor (as per the TPC) the right to self-government in the territory they inhabited. Many Qimants view this as the first post-Derg injustice visited on them (Belay, 2013: 19), and it prompted some of them to begin taking measures to ensure that they received recognition as a distinct ethnic community.

When the next national census was carried out in 1994, the Qimant were still counted as a distinct ethnic community (FDRE–CSA, 1995), with 172,291 individuals reportedly identifying as Qimant. However, some members of the community maintain that this figure represents only a fraction of the total Qimant population and that the majority of those who identify as Qimant neither speak Qimantey nor adhere to Hege-Lebona, the Qimants' traditional religion – two factors that make the community a distinct ethnic group.

The exclusion of the Qimant community from the next census in 2007 (FDRE–CSA, 2008) angered its elite and activists and lent further impetus to their quest for recognition (Awoke, 2010: 10; Berihu, 2010). Qimant representatives attempted to communicate their grievances to state officials, the leaders of the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM; the region's ruling party at the time), and the Central Statistics Agency (CSA) in charge of conducting censuses. However, the state officials were unwilling even to receive the Qimants' petition and consider their demands (Interview with Melkamu Sisay, Gondar, July 2017).

State officials were adamant that the Qimant community had been entirely assimilated with the Amhara ethnic group and that there was hence no reason to include them in the region's list of ethnic communities (Interview with Yalew Abate, Gondar, July 2015). According to some interviewees, state officials were warned that excluding the Qimant from the census would have negative political consequences, but these warnings were ignored. Be that as it may, the exclusion of the Qimant community from the 2007 census marked a turning-point in their quest for recognition and self-government. According to Belay (2013), the 2007 census was an opportune moment for the Qimant to press their demands, a point which Awoke (2010: 19) echoes.

Following further discussions and strong political mobilization, the Provisional Council for Coordinating Efforts to Secure Recognition and Self-Government for the Qimant (hereafter, the Coordinating Council), consisting of 120 members, was established on 24 May 2009 to spearhead the quest for recognition and self-government. The Coordinating Council began its work on 7 June 2009 by electing an Executive Committee composed of 12 members. The Executive Committee resolved to negotiate with Amhara state officials and leaders of the ANDM and press its demands for recognition and self-government. It also decided to conduct a comprehensive study of the Qimants' history and current socio-cultural and political situation. Likewise, a number of sub-committees were established at the *woreda* and *kebele* (neighbourhood) levels in order to mobilize the Qimant community.

Qimant members of the ANDM signalled their disapproval of the decision by the state officials and party leaders to exclude the Qimant community from the census, and the Coordinating Council resolved to investigate why the Qimant were not counted as a distinct community (Interview with Belay Shibeshi, Gondar, July 2017). However, it soon decided that it was unnecessary to waste time on inquiring into how and why their community had been excluded from the 2007 census; rather, efforts should focus on pushing ahead with the quest for recognition and self-government on the basis of the principles contained in the federal and Amhara state constitutions (Interview with members of the Coordinating Council who wished to remain anonymous, Gondar, July 2017). At this point, the demands for recognition and the right to self-government, after having first been made informally in 1991, enjoyed a revival and started to draw mass popular support from all quarters of the Qimant community.

A month after the formation of the Coordinating Council, a petition with 18,000 signatures demanding recognition of the Qimant as a distinct ethnic community and their right to self-government was formally submitted to Ayalew Gobeze, the then head of Amhara state (Interview with Molla Jember, Gondar, July 2017). In this petition, the Coordinating Council asserted that places such as Chilga and La'y Armachiho as well as parts of Gondar Zuria, Quara, Metema, Wegera, and Dembia *woredas* were predominantly inhabited by the Qimant community. According to the Coordinating Council, these places covered a total of 126 contiguous *kebeles* and it demanded that ethnic local self-government, in the form of a Qimant nationality zone, be established within a demarcated territorial area incorporating all 126 of the *kebeles*.

Responses of the federal and state governments

Ayalew Gobeze received the petition and promised a swift and positive response, though he also asked the petitioners to give him time to consult with his advisors and other government officials, including the Speaker of the State Council, so that the matter could be considered by the State Council. Ayalew then reneged on his promise and failed to come back to the Coordinating Council with a response of any kind. Moreover, the Speaker of the State Council excluded the Qimant issue from the legislative agenda when the Council held its next session soon after the petition was lodged.

Members of the Coordinating Council then decided to take their case to the federal level. Therefore, on 22 July 2010 and in accordance with the procedure laid out under Proclamation No. 251/2001, they lodged their appeal with the Ethiopian House of Federation (HoF) (Yirga, 2016: 58). Members of the HoF were none too enthusiastic about entertaining the Qimant issue. Some members of the Standing Committee for Constitutional and Identity Affairs – especially representatives from Amhara state – argued vehemently that the matter had to be considered first at the state level before it could be brought formally to the HoF in the form of an appeal (Interview with Daniel Demissie, Bahir Dar, July 2016). The HoF thus decided that the matter should be sent back to the Amhara State Council to be reconsidered.

Members of the Qimant Coordinating Council felt that the decision by the HoF to send the matter back to the Amhara state level was unconstitutional and caused unnecessary delay. They argued that the HoF had the power to consider the matter without referring it back to the state, not least, given that the Amhara State Council had failed to reach a decision a year after the petition had been submitted to its head of government. However, the reluctance of the HoF to entertain the Qimants' demands for self-government should hardly come as a surprise, because the governing EPRDF – once so enthusiastic about the right to self-determination of all ethnic communities in the 1990s – had since decided that the principle of establishing state and local governments based on ethnic criteria alone was bad for national development (Aalen, 2008: 128; Vaughan, 2003: 249).

Members of the Qimant community and several activists raised the issue once again at the governing party's annual conference in Bahir Dar (the capital of Amhara state) in September 2010, demanding a swift resolution of the matter. Addisu Legese, the former Chairman of the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) and deputy Prime Minister, who was chairing the conference, showed his support for the Qimant cause (Interview with Molla Jember, Gondar, July 2017). He criticized the Amhara state officials for taking too long to resolve the matter, and stressed that those responsible for doing so should be held to account. He further promised that the Qimants' demands for recognition and local self-government would be addressed in full as soon as the 2010 national elections were over (Interview with Belay Shibeshi, Gondar, July 2015). However, many within the Amhara state leadership believed that it was only a self-interested elite that was pushing the demands for recognition and self-government and that there was little support for the issue among the wider Qimant community.

Members of the Coordinating Council and its Executive Committee continued consulting with the Qimant community to win its support on the matter. For instance, in September 2014, the Coordinating Council held a public meeting in the town of Ayikel, which was attended by more than 4,000 people. Likewise, more than 8,000 members of the community participated in a public rally held in La'y Armachiho *woreda*. Many people also wanted an explanation for the delay in dealing with their demands for recognition and self-government. Similar public gatherings were held in other *woredas* in central and western Gondar (Interview with Belay Shibeshi, Gondar, July 2015).

However, the state officials kept delaying, even hindering, the resolution of the Qimant issue. For instance, they obstructed a planned public rally in the town of Metema Yohannes



and the Quara *woredas* of western Gondar (Interview with Belay Shibeshi, Gondar, July 2015). They also began harassing members of the Coordinating Council and its Executive Committee. In February 2014, for example, some members of the Council were arrested in North Gondar and sent to Debarq prison. This took place just before an investigative team of the HoF arrived in the area to visit and consult with community members regarding their demands for recognition and self-government (Interview with Abayneh Zewudu, Gondar, July 2016).

The delay and obstruction began causing sporadic conflict between members of the Qimant community and the state's security forces. In March 2014, the Amhara State Council – suddenly, and without serious consultation with members of the Coordinating Council (let alone the wider Qimant community) – passed a resolution recognizing the Qimant as a distinct ethnic community. The Council noted in its resolution that there had been undue delay in responding to the demands for recognition of the Qimant community. It further stated that there were significant cultural similarities between the Qimant and the surrounding Amhara community, to the extent that it was almost impossible to distinguish between members of the two communities. According to the State Council, while it was necessary to give recognition to the Qimants' distinct identity, neither territorial autonomy nor ethnicity-based local self-government were appropriate methods of accommodation. Instead, the Council decided, the state government should take the necessary steps to preserve the Qimantey language, which was at risk of extinction.

The Amhara state government, in other words, resolved to accommodate the Qimant on a non-territorial basis through a form of cultural autonomy. It clearly ignored the fact that members of the Qimant community lived in contiguous territorial areas and that identity, as per the country's Constitution and specifically Article 39(5) (FDRE, 1995), is not simply a matter of having a common language but also of sharing a common psychological make-up.

The State Council's decision triggered widespread public protests and inter-ethnic conflict. Members of the Coordinating Council took their case once again to the HoF, claiming that mere recognition of the Qimant as an ethnic community without territorial autonomy would not satisfy the community's demands. The HoF set up a study group which it sent to the area where the Qimant are found. The study group made a preliminary investigation and presented their results in Bahir Dar to state officials and representatives of the Qimant community (Belay Shibeshi, Gondar, July 2015).

Nonetheless, the preliminary study did not clearly identify the territorial areas that the Qimant supposedly inhabit. The state officials, members of the Coordinating Council, and the HoF study group therefore agreed that it should undertake a second round of investigation to identify all areas that are inhabited by the Qimant. However, shortly after this agreement was reached, the Amhara State Council wrote a letter to the HoF stating that a second round of study was not necessary, and the study group consequently stopped its work. Moreover, in June 2015, the State Council resolved to grant the community's demands for territorial autonomy in the form of ethnicity-based local government and adopted a proclamation to the effect that a Qimant special *woreda* would be established in not more than 42 *kebeles* within four months.⁷ The state sent a copy of its decision to the HoF, which was formally approved by the latter on 24 June 2015.

However, as already mentioned, the Qimant considered 126 *kebeles* to be their own. The state government's decision only to establish a Qimant zone in 42 *kebeles* was completely unacceptable, and they thus appealed to the HoF, stating that the decision of Amhara state did not satisfy their demands. After considering their complaint, the HoF concluded that the state had indeed responded satisfactorily to the Qimants' demands for self-government and that therefore the Coordinating Council should resolve all remaining issues – including the question of which *kebeles* should be included within the community's self-governing territory – in consultation with the Amhara State Council. These decisions by the state government and the HoF further aggravated the problem rather than resolving it and led to another round of inter-ethnic

conflict. Close to a hundred people, Amhara and Qimant alike, were killed, with tens of thousands displaced and public and private property severely damaged.⁸

As the security situation deteriorated, the Amhara State Council decided to increase the number of *kebeles* that could be included within the Qimant special *woreda* from 42 to 69. This did not satisfy the Qimants, however, and nor did it stop the conflict. Not only were the 69 *kebeles* far fewer than the 126 that the Qimant demanded, but Ayikel town – the political, cultural, and religious centre of the Qimant – did not lie within them; a fact that outraged many in the Qimant community. Moreover, three *kebeles* with a predominantly Qimant population were cut off from the Qimant local administrative area because a single *kebele* with a predominantly Amhara population lay between them (Interview with Abayneh Zewudu, Gondar, July 2016).

The state government was willing to deny the Qimant in these three *kebeles* inclusion within the Qimant administrative zone in order to avoid the Amharas in the one *kebele* being enclosed within it as well. Disagreement over this matter prevented the peaceful resolution of the problem, and thus the conflict between armed militias of the Qimant and the Amhara state special police force continued. Finally, the Amhara State Council and the Qimant Coordinating Council agreed that the fate of eight contested *kebeles* should be determined by a referendum, following which seven of them decided to remain within the existing Amhara administrative zone and one joined the Qimant ethnic administration.

THE QIMANT QUESTION SINCE ABIY AHMED'S RISE TO POWER

Over the past few years, Ethiopia has been undergoing a political transformation of seismic proportions. This transformation follows three years of public protests that began in 2015 soon after the EPRDF claimed 100% victory in the 2015 national elections. The protests started in Oromia state, their immediate cause being grievances associated with maladministration in certain localities, and gradually spread nationwide, with protesters demanding major political reforms and an end to the authoritarian rule of the EPRDF.

The protests turned violent in some parts of the country, and the manner in which the government attempted to halt the violence sowed division within the EPRDF, several members of which felt there should be more inclusive democratic rule in the country. This soon led to a political shake-up within the ruling coalition. In March 2018, Haile Mariam Dessalegn, who was Chairman of the EPRDF and the country's Prime Minister, resigned and was replaced by Abiy Ahmed, who was sworn in as the new Prime Minister on 2 April 2018 and immediately introduced several measures to open up Ethiopia's political space. The public protests and ensuing political transformation had two major consequences for the Qimant community's quest for recognition and self-government.

The first of these came about as a result of the internal changes that took place within Amhara state's governing party, the ANDM. Following the changes at the national level, many of the ANDM's senior figures were ousted from the party. The new leadership (which included former opposition party members) accused the previous one of being too close to the ruling party of neighbouring Tigray state, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which allegedly built its political capital by blaming the country's ills on the Amhara people. The ANDM's former leadership was also accused of compromising the interests of the Amhara people by (among other things) ceding a large swathe of land to Tigray state along the shared border. This resulted in every non-Amhara member of the party being viewed with suspicion.

As far as the new leadership of the ANDM was concerned, any demand for ethnicity-based recognition and self-government was an agenda contrived by the TPLF to divide the people of the state along ethnic lines. Hence, those making such demands were accused of doing the TPLF's bidding to destabilize the state, and the Qimants' quest for recognition and self-



government was viewed through the same lens. (This already fraught situation is further complicated by the civil war between the federal government and the TPLF-led Tigray state, which began in November 2020.)⁹

The second major consequence of the public protests which erupted in 2015 was the widespread breakdown of law and order in different parts of the country. Informal and ethnicity-based youth movements emerged in almost every state, including the Qerro in Oromia, the Fanno in Amhara, the Zerma in Guragie, and the Ejetto in Sidama. These movements, which began by raising legitimate political and economic concerns, soon degenerated into ethnicity-based vigilante groups that attacked minorities and those they considered as outsiders.

As a result, in Amhara state the Fanno – often with the support or acquiescence of the state security apparatus – took part in the inter-communal violence between the Qimant and the Amhara, on the side of the Amhara. According to a 2020 report by Amnesty International on the human rights situation in Ethiopia, hundreds were killed and tens of thousands displaced as a result of the inter-communal violence between the Amhara and the Qimant, not to mention the destruction of property, and the Fanno were one of the major parties in the conflict. The report notes that:

According to data from the government Security Department of Central Gondar Zone, at least 46 people were killed in the inter-communal attacks that began in late September and continued to mid-October 2019. The security forces, mainly regional police and the local militia, were unwilling to control the violence in and around Gondar City, while the Fanno vigilante group was going home to home attacking Qimant residents. The attacks and counterattacks led to internal displacement of thousands of ethnic Amhara and Qimant people to Gondar City, Weleqa, Chilga, and Ayimba. Internally Displaced People (IDPs) face several human rights violations including denial of humanitarian aid to compel them to return to localities from which they are displaced, forced return, and lack of basic services (education, health and adequate shelter). (Amnesty International, 2020)

In short, the breakdown in law and order, especially in Amhara state, has made it extremely difficult for the Qimants to achieve the local self-government they desire.

CONCLUSION

The accommodation of ethnic diversity at both the national and sub-national level is the ‘foundational principle’ of the Ethiopian constitutional and federal system established in 1995. The Constitution (FDRE, 1995) thus contains clear provisions on how intra-state minorities such as the Qimant could be accommodated. The Constitution’s primary institutional option is the territorial accommodation of ethnic communities. Therefore, viewed against the provisions set out within the Constitution, the demands of the Qimants for recognition and local self-government were legitimate and should and could have been granted in time to prevent the inter-ethnic conflict that led to the death and displacement of a multitude of people from both the Qimant and Amhara communities.

It should be noted, however, that the appropriateness of constitutionally entrenching ethnicity as the sole factor of political organization in Ethiopia, to the exclusion of geographic, historical, economic, and other factors, remains a much-contested issue. The practicality of providing a state or local self-government for every ethnic community is also debatable. Nevertheless, this right is enshrined within the 1995 Constitution, regardless of the population size of the ethnic community making such demands, the size of the territorial area it occupies, or the economic viability of the state or local government that would be so established.

Consequently, the Constitution has created undue expectations on the part of many ethnic communities to have their own state and local government. Moreover, the situation is being exploited by ethnic elites ('ethnopreneurs') with an eye on the financial and other benefits they would gain if an ethnicity-based state and local government were created. Hence, more than ten intra-state ethnic communities – especially in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples (SNNP) region – are currently demanding their own state, while several others are demanding their own local government. The Sidama people, for example, have already voted in a referendum to secede from the SNNP and establish their own state. The federal government is making every effort to keep the floodgates closed, even though, in the face of violent inter-ethnic conflict, this is becoming increasingly untenable.

It is thus time to have a sober reflection on ways to revise the Constitution so that it can provide an institutional framework for managing diversity in the country without rendering it 'a museum of social and cultural antiquities' (Steiner, 1991: 1552).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Special police forces are paramilitary units. It remains a matter of debate as to whether the 1995 Constitution of Ethiopia authorizes states to establish them. Nonetheless, all of the states have such forces.
- ² This section, with some revision, is taken from the first author's previous work (Ayele, 2014).
- ³ The EPRDF was a coalition of four ethnicity-based parties: the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) (later the Amhara Democratic Party – ADP); the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) (later the Oromo Democratic Party – ODP); the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF); and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM). The EPRDF dominated the political landscape for close to 30 years until three years of public protest led to its undoing. As will be discussed, after Abiy Ahmed came to power, it was disbanded and converted into a new party, the Ethiopian Prosperity Party (PP), which is different in both structure and ideology.
- ⁴ This right was conditional in that it could be exercised only if an ethnic community were convinced that its right to self-government was 'denied, abridged or abrogated'. In addition, the right could be exercised if a nation and nationality's right to participation in the central government freely and on an equal basis was 'denied, abridged or abrogated'. This was changed under the 1995 Constitution (FDRE, 1995), which recognizes each ethnic community as having an unconditional right to secession.
- ⁵ More than 20 ethnicity-based local governments, known as special zones and special *woredas*, have been established in five states: Amhara, Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambela, and SNNP (see Ayele & Fessha, 2012).
- ⁶ The emperors who ruled Ethiopia claimed to be the descendants of King Solomon of Israel – hence the 'Solomonic dynasty'. Between 900 and 1270 the country was ruled by the Zagwe dynasty. In 1270, King Yikuno-Amlak ousted the last Zagwe king and restored the Solomonic dynasty, which ruled the country until Haile Selassie, the last monarch, was ousted in 1974 by the military junta led by Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam. See Zwide, 2002.
- ⁷ Amhara Regional State: A Proclamation to Establish the Qimant Special *Woreda* No. 229/2015.
- ⁸ According to the report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (2016: 81), 97 people were killed and 86 seriously injured as a result of conflict between the Amhara special police force and members of the Qimant community.
- ⁹ Soon after the 2015 elections, a division emerged within the EPRDF – a coalition of four ethnicity-based regional parties, within which the TPLF was the most dominant group (see note 3). The immediate cause of the division was the heavy-handed manner with which the federal government's armed forces (allegedly dominated by the TPLF) responded to the anti-regime public protests that took place in Oromia and Amhara states between 2015 and 2018. The intra-party division became a cause for change in the party leadership, which in turn led to the rise to power of Abiy Ahmed, the current Prime Minister. Ahmed introduced various measures to consolidate power in his own hand, including fundamentally restructuring the party coalition. As a result, the TPLF lost its influence within the EPRDF and hence within the federal government. The TPLF's leaders therefore withdrew from the federal government and set up base in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, where they began acting as an oppositional political force. The political altercation between the two sides worsened after the federal government and the Tigray regional government declared their mutual non-recognition. This came about after the federal government postponed the sixth general election and extended its term beyond its mandate and the TPLF organized a regional election in Tigray state, since each deemed the action of the other unconstitutional. The political dispute finally turned into a military confrontation. The ensuing war, which is still ongoing despite the intermittent truces declared by either or both sides, has already caused an extensive humanitarian crisis in the region.

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How to cite this article: Ayele, Z. A., & Addisu, S. M. (2023). The political and cultural inclusion of intra-state ethnic minorities in Ethiopia: The case of the Qimant of Amhara state. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12380>