

The difference between federation and confederation

By Fesseha Nair

Unity in Diversity

“ The concept of federalism is not a new concept as some Ethiopian or Eritrean political elites define. It is a unity without uniformity and diversity without fragmentation.”

Diversity is used as an expression of harmony and unity between dissimilar individuals or groups. It is a concept of "unity without uniformity and diversity without fragmentation"^[1] that shifts focus from unity based on a mere tolerance of physical, cultural, linguistic, social, religious, political, ideological and/or psychological differences towards a more complex unity based on an understanding that difference enriches human interactions. The idea and related phrase is very old and dates back to ancient times in both Western and Eastern Old World cultures.

It has applications in many fields, including ecology, cosmology, philosophy, religion and politics.

The concept of unity in diversity was used by both the [indigenous peoples of North America]] and Taoist societies in 400–500 B.C. In premodern Western culture, it has existed in an implicit form in certain organic conceptions of the universe that developed in the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome. The phrase is a deliberate oxymoron, the rhetorical combination of two terms, *unitas* "unity, oneness" and *varietas* "variety, variousness". When used in a political context, it is often used to advocate federalism and multiculturalism.

Both federation and confederation are two forms of organizing political entity

What is a confederation?

A confederation is a union of equal, sovereign states (each recognized by the international community) that have formed, for limited general purposes, a common government. The EU and AU are examples of confederation.

What is federation?

A federation is a form of union consists of a system of divided powers where a central government and territorial units (known variously as provinces, regions, states or cantons) each have different policy responsibilities.

Thus a confederation is a treaty-based union that concedes few powers to the Centre for the sake of the liberty of the constituent units, which are also in principle free to secede.

Conversely, a federation has a constitution, which presupposes the permanency of the union, designed both to secure individual rights and divide power – the purpose being to reconcile unit self-government and individual freedom. As a result, even if in both types of union, the

units are subject to a central political authority, in a confederation this binds the states only as collective actors, thereby not creating rights or duties for individuals.

However, in a federation, government reaches down to individuals, for instance by guaranteeing certain constitutional freedoms or extracting taxes directly from citizens. This difference is visible in the legislative institutions of both types of union since a confederation has only one chamber, where all units are represented, whereas a federation has two chambers, one chosen to represent the units and another that represents all the citizens.

This is why a confederation is best described as a union of states, whilst a federation is at the same time a union of states and a community of individuals. In addition, given the need to respect state equality and sovereignty, decisions in a confederation – especially over reforming the treaty of union – are taken by unanimity, all members must agree before the powers or purposes of the union can be altered.

Power-sharing Democracy

The division of powers between territorial levels of government in a federation cannot be changed unilaterally by either level. Any change is based on a constitutional process incorporating both the units and the center. However, federal decision-making is based on the majority principle not unanimity – for constitutional change this typically requires a higher threshold, known as “supermajority”, rather than a simple majority.

Hence both types of union share similar features that distinguish them from unitary states, which have a simple hierarchy of government, no special representation of territorial units in the legislature and where the Centre is free to redraw the boundaries and reallocate the powers of territorial government unhindered.

Confederations and Federations in Modern World Politics

Although better known as an international organization, the United Nations is in effect a global confederation, which tries to reconcile state sovereignty with a weak common government concerned with global problems, notably peace, human rights, international development and environmental protection. The UN also illustrates the chief defects of confederation: the absence of a coercive authority to enforce member state compliance except ultimately via recourse to armed force, the subsequent reliance on states’ respect for their UN-imposed obligations and the stymieing effect of unanimous decision making, at least amongst the permanent members of the Security Council.

These structural weaknesses help explain why self-defense confederations such as the United Provinces of the Netherlands (1579-1795), the Swiss Confederation (1291-1848), the German Bund (1815-66) and the US under the Articles of Confederation (1781-1789) failed to survive into the modern era. Indeed, it was the desire to remedy the faults of confederation that prompted the members of the Philadelphia Convention (1787-1788) to design the first modern federation, the USA. US federalism was intended as a preferable alternative to a unitary, centralized republic because individual liberty was thought to require an effective central government kept in check by unit self-government. Hence federalism is considered a way of institutionalizing democracy, which is why non-democratic federations, such as the former USSR (1922-1991) or even the contemporary Russian Federation (1991-), are sometimes

seen as spurious instances of federation. Nonetheless, the spread of federalism has been such that by the year 2000 2 billion people lived in federations.

By cleaving political authority between two levels of government, the US federal constitution left unresolved many problems regarding how this separation would function in practice. The study of these issues is known as intergovernmental relations. Major research questions in this field include whether federations are subject to on-going centralization or else cycles of centralization and decentralization. In addition, the impact of federalism on the effectiveness and outcome of policymaking is also much studied. The relationship between democracy and federalism is also considerably debated since the anti-majoritarian nature of federal decision-making has been linked to conservatism and the entrenchment of special interests.

Today, however, the principal attraction of federation is less the protection of abstract notions of individual liberty than the ability to guarantee certain rights dear to ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities by granting autonomy to these territorially based minorities. Thus, the development of federalism in plural societies in most countries with diverse ethnicities is preferable than centralized unitary system of union.

I think main cause of the civil war in Ethiopia is how to organize the multicultural Ethiopia at local, regional and national level. Decentralized democratic federalism based on geographical territories is more preferable than ethnic federalism. Unitary centralized system of governance leader to dictatorship and dominance of one ethnic over the others-