



Beyond Constitutional Design: Pragmatic Federalism And Federal Trajectories In India And Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

This study comparatively examines the evolution of federalism in India and Ethiopia- the two federations with contrasting historical and institutional trajectories. Employing comparative historical analysis and process tracing, it investigates the origin of federalism, approaches to identity accommodation in federal design, conflict dynamics, and the role of party systems in shaping federal evolution. Drawing on government documents, constitutions, and existing literature, the study moves beyond constitution-centered approach of federalism by advancing pragmatic federalism which conceptualizes federalism as adaptive and continuously negotiated political process. The finding revealed that India's federalism exhibited resilience through constitutional flexibility, judicial constitutionalism, and accommodative identity management. In contrast, Ethiopia's federal trajectories have been constrained by ethnic-based politics, a weakly federalized party system and politically mediated identity management through House of federation. The find revealed that the resilience of federal systems depends not only on constitutional design but also federalized party system, judicial constitutionalism for identity

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management, and institutionalized avenues for conflict resolution. These findings contribute to the study of comparative federalism by advancing pragmatic federalism that contends the sustainability of federal systems as depend not only on constitutional design but also on adaptive institutions, federalized party systems, and institutionalized mechanisms for identity and conflict management.

1. INTRODUCTION

Federalism is an institutional mechanism of shared rule and self-rule that grants territorial autonomy to its constituent units within a single political system. It encompasses a larger political process through which political authority is negotiated, debated, and reshaped across different levels of government(Hooghe & Marks., 2003). Traditionally, federalism is conceived as system of shared rule and self-rule between central and regional states, each working independently within its spheres of authority(Wheare, 1963) It has characteristics, such as dual government, constitutional supremacy, separation of powers, and judicial arbitration(Basu, 1976; Watts, 2008).

By constitutionally accommodating diversity, federalism serves as an institutional mechanism for managing the tension between self-rule and shared rule in deeply divided societies. Even though both India and Ethiopia took distinct paths to federalization, they both resorted to federalism to accommodate the difficulties associated with governing heterogenous societies.(Austin, 1966; Fiseha, 2007).

Most existing studies have focused on the design of the constitution, the management of identity, or the dynamics of conflict towards the emergence of federalism, with limited comparative analyses, especially in conceptualizing how federal systems evolve through the interaction between formal institutions and political practice. This gap is evident in recent scholarship on African federalism by (Yimenu, 2025) an institutional and veto-player framework by (Kantorowicz & Voigt, 2025), and polycentric federalism by(Demerew et al., 2025), which examined the institutional design and capacity of federal arrangements to manage ethnic-based conflicts. Several comparative studies on both countries explained federalism in plural countries and how diversity is accommodated to bring national unity(Ayalew, 2021; Yisak, 2020). We found a gap while comparing existing literature on federalism in Ethiopia and India with scarce conceptual literature on pragmatic federalism ideals.

The existing studies have focused mainly on constitutional design and the allocation of political power and institutions. Recognizing these perspectives remains valuable, but they tend to ignore the dynamic political



processes as federal systems adapt and evolve in reaction to changing social and political conditions. Dimensions of interaction including party system-organization, identity-accommodation, conflict management, judicial engagement and political negotiation shape long-term stability or instability of federal systems yet are surprisingly under-investigated within the context of constitution-oriented explanations.

Employing a comparative historical analysis and process tracing this paper fills this gap by comparing the evolution of federalism in India and Ethiopia. Based on constitutional texts, government documents, and existing literature, it establishes pragmatic federalism as a theoretical framework for contending that federalism is not static but rather an ongoing process of political negotiation and adaptation within a structure in which the state and regional governments share power. However, the study illustrates that successful federalism is not merely attributable to constitutional design; rather it hinges upon adaptive political institutions, effective federalized party systems and management of identities as well as institutionalization of conflict resolution mechanisms.

Pragmatic federalism has four interdependent dimensions. First, institutional flexibility, where constitutional and institutional arrangements of a given federal state can respond to new challenges. Such flexibility enables federal systems to absorb pressures without the need for fundamental constitutional breakdown. Second, a competitive and federalized party system is conducive to federal bargaining and intergovernmental negotiation. In line with this argument (Bermeo, 2002, p. 105) argued that the refusal to federalize rather than federalism itself stimulates secession. Following Bermeo (2002) it can be said that instability comes not from federalism per se but failure to institutionalize processes of political integration. However, a lack of federalized political parties can undermine all mechanisms of political integration, allowing territorial cleavages to deepen and increase its vulnerability to fragmentation with secessionist demands and political instability. Third, conflict management capacity is important in any federal country. In this way, conflict becomes institutionalized through electoral, judicial, and intergovernmental mechanisms, enabling federal systems to turn political contestation into constitutional adaptation and thereby to alter the course of federal evolution. Finally, identity accommodation is either through integrative policies or territorialized arrangements that align political units with identity groups. These strategies are conditioned by their mediation through political and institutional practices. Viewed via this angle pragmatic federalism urges strong federalism that protects minority groups against the tyranny of the majority, which is intended to prevent majoritarian cultures from dominating self-governing minorities. Drawing on Elazar (1987, 1995), Hueglin & Fenna (2015), and Watts (2008) who viewed federalism as a fluid and contextual political system, pragmatic federalism is understood as an ongoing political project emphasizing the



continues negotiation, adaptation, and reconfiguration of federal structures over time to accommodate diversity, uphold national unity, and promote political stability in deeply divided societies.

The article addresses the following four core fundamental questions: First, why do federal systems in similar diverse societies develop differently over time? Second, how could competitive and territorially embedded party systems reshape the federal system? Third, how political conflict reshapes federal dynamics over time. Fourth, how integrative approaches to identity management contribute to the long-term stability of federal governance. By integrating these parameters, the article shifts the analytical focus from static constitutional design to dynamic interaction between institutions and political practice over time. This study argues that an adaptable federal system, federalized party competition, flexible identity management, and conflict dynamics reshape the evolution of federalism.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This introductory chapter uses comparative historical analysis as an analytical tool, to consider the development of federalism in India and Ethiopia from their constitutional roots to present-day institutional pathways. It allows for an exploration of how political legacies, identity accommodation, the evolution of party systems and institutional change have affected the functioning of federalism over time (Mahoney, & Rueschemeyer, 2003; Skocpol, 2008). This comparative analysis is complemented with process tracing that reveals the causal mechanisms through which constitutional arrangements, political institutions, and governance practices are linked to federal resilience or instability (Beach, & Pedersen, 2013). Using these methods together facilitates the development of pragmatic federalism, which understands federalism not as a constitutional arrangement but rather as an adaptive political process involving institutional adaptation, political negotiation and shifting Centre-state relations.

The conception of federalism in the study is that it is not a fixed constitutional design but a fluid political process of political negotiation, institutional adaptation and institutionalized conflict management. The study relies on constitutions, parliamentary debates, official government reports, judicial decisions and academic literature. Thematic analysis of these materials reveals the patterns of continuity, adaptation, and transformation in federal system evolution across constitutional, institutional, identity-protection, and party system reconfigurations.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Historical Trajectories of Federalism in India and Ethiopia



India and Ethiopia have different histories of state-building, colonial experience, political development, and regime transition. Yet, a common institutionalized federalism has developed as a means of preserving territorial integrity in ethnically heterogeneous societies. The routes to federalization were quite different in the two countries. In India, federalism emerged gradually through constitutional evolution and administrative decentralization in the late colonial era. However, the Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935 laid the ground for some provincial autonomy and established the institutional foundations for the sharing of territorial power (Austin, 1966; Sardar, 2025). But after independence and partition, the leaders of the Indian National Congress opted for a highly centralized federal structure, arguing that concentration of authority was necessary to maintain national unity and protect the polity from further territorial disintegration (Brass, 1994). Furthermore, (Tillin, 2021) indicated that India's federation's centripetal orientation was further solidified in the early post-independence era by the institutionalization of a centralized national economy through planning institutions, budgetary coordination, and developmental governance.

However, centralizing tendencies in the Indian state gave rise to strong regional and linguistic mobilizations that challenged attempts at political homogenization. In the 1950s, the rise in demands for linguistic recognition, regional autonomy, and reorganization led the union government to respond to subnational aspirations through the States Reorganization Act of 1956 (Adeney, 2007; Arora, 1995). Hence, India's federal restructuring acted as a strategy to maintain national unity while accommodating territorially concentrated identities (Stepan, 1999).

Recently, under Narendra Modi, a new phase of political centralization has emerged in the Indian federation. Since 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has increasingly focused on national integration, administrative uniformity, and centralized fiscal coordination. The Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime, the growing number of centrally sponsored schemes such as the National Education Policy of 2020, and the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir in 2019 have all contributed to strengthening the disproportionate authority of the Union government vis-vis the states. Such centrally motivated and executive-controlled policy was critiqued for undermining the policy innovation and autonomy of the regional states (Sharma & Swenden, 2017; Tillin, 2021).

In contrast, Ethiopia's federalism has been the product of violent political struggle and revolutionary change, not gradual constitutional evolution. Successive imperial and military regimes pursued centralized state-building projects that marginalized ethnonational communities and enforced cultural and political homogenization (Fisseha, 2012; Markakis, 2011). These exclusionary policies resulted in armed struggles by



ethnonational liberation movements, which redefined the ‘nationality question’ narrative as a struggle for self-determination, equality, and political autonomy (Aalen, 2006, 2011; Vaughn, S, 2003). The demise of the Derg regime in 1991 brought a major political event, which allowed the introduction of ethnic federalism under the 1995 Constitution.

Article 39 of the 1995 Ethiopian Constitution declared that nations, nationalities, and peoples were recognized as sovereign political communities with unconditional rights to self-determination, including secession (Fiseha, 2007; Habtu, 2005). To this end, different scholars argued that Ethiopian federalism structured identity as the fundamental pillar of territorial organization and political representation, contrary to India’s accommodation of diversity through linguistic state reorganization, DE constitutionalizing identity at the statehood level.

After 2018 political reform, political and institutional transformations were marked by extensive centralization, party reconfiguration, polarized discourse on ethnic federalism and new forms of Centre-state relations as well as the demands for statehood. Abiy Ahmed intended to promote political liberalization, opening of democratic space, and reconciliation after decades of centralized dominance by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). But later reforms have increasingly characterized as efforts to recentralize political authority and encourage a pan-Ethiopian national identity that challenged the fundamentals of ethnic federalism. The formation of the Prosperity Party (PP) in 2019 attempted to move beyond ethnic politics towards a more integrative political order. These changes provoked fierce opposition from the regional elite, especially from Tigray, which led to violent conflict in 2022 and a renewed debate on the future of Ethiopia’s ethnic federalism. In short, Ethiopian federalism reflects ongoing struggles ethnonational of self-determination and national political integration under Prosperity Party.

The historical trajectories of India and Ethiopia provide evidence that federalism is determined not solely by how it is designed constitutionally but also by the political and institutional processes through which it evolves. While India has managed to keep its federation alive through incremental institutional evolution, Ethiopia continues to grapple with reconciling ethnonational self-determination and national integration amid recurring political centralization. These varied experiences imply that resilience in federal systems is contingent upon the continuous negotiation of political relationships, the adaptation of institutions over time and a measure of competence in Centre–state relations reaffirm our concept of pragmatic federalism.



3.2. Conflict Trajectories for the Evolution of Federalism in India and Ethiopia

The trajectories of India's and Ethiopia's federal development embody two different models of federal development through conflict. Indian federalism was developed in the postcolonial state structure, initially establishing a centralized governance due to fears of secession and territorial disintegration. The 1956 linguistic reorganization of states was a critical point in this process, as it transformed potentially destabilizing identity-based claims into institutionalized forms of territorial representation and democratic competition (Brass, 1994; Tillin, 2013). Linguistic identity recognition was not a process that undermined national integration but legitimized the Indian federation by incorporating regional aspirations within the constitutional framework.

Eventually, this selective strategy changes due to shifts in the party system. The weakening of the Indian National Congress and the rise of multiparty regional power configurations, albeit with modest formal constitutional reform, reinforced the functional federalization of center–state interactions (Chhibber, & Kollman., 2009). So Indian federalism, over time, was defined more by inter-governmental bargaining, coalition-politics, and the magnifying impact of regional party competition.

In India, Central institutions, such as the Goods and Services Tax (GST), centrally sponsored schemes, and the increasing power of national executive institutions have led to friction in the center-state balance in recent years (Tillin, 2022). These indicate a transition from a previous phase of accommodation of identities to a more centralized model of economic and administrative coordination. Yet these tensions remain largely institutionalized in constitutional and electoral frameworks. Federal disputes are still mediated through judicial review, coalition politics, and state-level electoral competition and intergovernmental negotiation. While the pressures for centralization have increased, the federal system has great potential for democratic adaptation. To this end, the sustainability of the Indian federation has been less reliant on constitutional design but on how political power is dispersed democratically through electoral competition, regional party mobilization, and negotiated political compromise.

On the contrary, Ethiopian federalism introduced in 1995 was deeply connected to the armed struggles of ethnonational movements who viewed self-rule as vital to overcome historical patterns of political exclusion and centralized domination (Fisseha, 2006; Aalen, 2011). The 1995 Ethiopian constitution recognized ethnic identity, territorial autonomy through decentralization, and a constitutional right to self-determination, including secession. Formally, this was a unique attempt to constitutionalize ethnic federalism in Africa. But the institutional path of Ethiopian federalism showed a continuing tension between constitutional decentralization and political centralization. The dominance of the Ethiopian People's



Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) reveals this fact (Fisseha, Aalen 2011). Federalism operates under a strict party-system hierarchy. It did not allow political autonomy to regional states to make decisions independently and kept intergovernmental relations subordinated to central control (Vaughan, 2011). Federalism, therefore, operated as a vertically controlled rather than a horizontally negotiated pluralism within the political structure.

The political transition after 2018 brought these underlying tensions with greater intensity. While political liberalization initially opened to democratic federal reform, it simultaneously undermined the central mechanisms through which the previous regime had held the political system. More recently, conflict between federal forces and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in Tigray, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) in Oromia, and the Fanno Militia in Amhara illustrate how contestations of sovereignty, self-rule, and national unity persisted in the federal system (Abbink, 2025). Attempts of recentralization, framed in the discourse of national survival and state consolidation, aggravated contestation between constitutional autonomy and executive authority. Federalism became an increasingly central site of political struggle, rather than a stable framework for managing conflict.

India and Ethiopia present one of the starkest contrasts simply because a federal design can only be effective if institutions can manage conflict, accommodating diversity and maintaining Centre–state relations through negotiation. Together these findings evidence pragmatic federalism as a dynamic model of federal evolution.

3.3. Management of Ethnonational Identity in Federal Design

Federalism is designed to accommodate diversity (Palermo & Kössler, 2017). However, managing identity is a major challenge in the design and operation of federal systems, especially in highly diverse societies. To address these problems, federal systems have resorted to diverse institutional mechanisms such as territorial autonomy, power-sharing arrangements, and constitutional guarantees for minority recognition.

In Ethiopia, the mechanism of identity management is given to the House of Federation (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995). According to Tesfa, 2025; Yimenu (2023) the representation formula in the House is a mixture of equal representation and proportional representation. Article 61(2) it provided that Each Nation Nationalities and Peoples (NNP) consist of at least one member in the House, and an extra representative for everyone million of its population. This signifies that only one person represents each group with a population of less than 1 million denoting equal representation. On the other hand, NNPs in excess of one million have an extra representative for each additional million its population But the



constitutional architecture of the House of Federation shows that identity accommodation in Ethiopia simultaneously takes on strong majoritarian tendencies (Mgbako et al., 2008).

The Constitution vests constitutional interpretation and self-determination in the House of Federation (HoF) and not in an independent judiciary or supreme court (Articles 62 and 83(1)). This makes Ethiopia unique approach to the burning issue of constitutional interpretation. While in the federations such as USA, Canada and India, power of constitutional interpretation was given to the judiciary, to regular supreme court, in Germany, Belgium and Spain separate constitutional courts was established for this respective purpose(Watts, 1996). However, Ethiopia departs from this common trend by sidelining the judiciary from its traditional power domain and entrusting the power to the second federal chamber -the House of Federation. The intention behind this was to ensure that constitutional disputes over self-determination and ethnic autonomy would be settled politically by representatives of different communities. Arguably the constitution is the agreement among nation nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia and sovereign power is constitutionally vested in them. The composition of the HoF is heavily determined by proportional and equal representation of minority communities(Assefa, 2009; Tesfa, 2025, p. 398; Yimenu, 2023, p. 1629).

Contrary to this argument there is tension between population-based representation and representation of every nation, nationalities and people in this chamber. Hence,(Tesfa, 2025, p. 397)argued that unlike interpretations that depict the House of Federation as purely majoritarian or primarily permissive of only minorities, its representational structure embodies both demographic and ethno-pluralist principles. While the population criterion amplifies larger ethno-linguistic groups like the Oromo and Amhara, constitutional guarantees of representation for all Nations, Nationalities and Peoples favor smaller communities. This combination results in a hybrid organization where demographic domination is controlled but not removed by the mechanisms to safeguard ethnic diversity.

House of Federation is not only a chamber of ethnic representation, but also a political institution of ethno-regional elites whose decisions are influenced by political interests. Article 83(1) leaves such a body final constitutional authority, embedding constitutional adjudication within elite power competition at ethnic and regional levels rather than insulating it through judicial independence(The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995, article 83(1)). Consequently, it is not an impartial constitutional arbitration but a politicized ethnic representation that constitutes identity management in Ethiopia.

On the contrary, India's identity is not the explicit constitutional basis of the state structure. Instead, the Constitution has several institutional mechanisms to accommodate linguistic, cultural, tribal, and regional diversities. These provisions allow the federation to respond to identity-based demands through



constitutional and political negotiation. Austin (1966) argued that the Indian constitutional framework attempted to balance diversity and national unity through flexible institutional arrangements rather than rigid ethnic compartmentalization. Similarly, (Tillin, 2013) notes that Indian federalism was shaped by ongoing territorial rearrangements and political adaptations in response to regional demands without constitutionally entrenching the federation on ethnic lines. The linguistic reorganization of states after 1956 showed the ability to satisfy regional aspirations without compromising the integrity of the Union. Furthermore, asymmetric constitutional arrangements under Articles 371 (a-j) and the Sixth Schedule differentiated autonomy to the culturally distinct and tribal areas, especially in North-East India.

As (Lijphart, 1966) observes, India's federalism is a kind of accommodative democracy that mixes diversity management with strong integrative institutions. Unlike Ethiopia, where ethnic groups represented directly in Hof, India's Rajya Sabha is territorial operation. Political representation is given to states and not to ethnic or linguistic groups. While more populous states consequently receive more seats such as Uttar Pradesh, the arrangement does not accord ethnic identities direct political recognition. Thus, India's system ties representation to geography and demographics while explicitly avoiding the use of ethnicity for representational purposes. The HoF is supposed to represent ethnic groups, but in practice it operates through regional states, creating a gap between constitutional provisions and political reality that renders representation more complex.

The House of Federation diverges from existing typologies of federal second chambers in both demos-constraining and demos-enhancing senses. In lieu, its logic of representation is based on an inherently ethno-plural design, one that layers population-based allocation with constitutionally guaranteed representation for all Nations, Nationalities and Peoples rewarding member states having internal heterogeneity over those of homogeneity. It generates a hybrid institution that is heteros-enhancing and homos-constraining at the same time. In contrast, the Rajya Sabha of India emanates from a territorially mediated model of federalism based on representation through states and not ethnic or linguistic groups where population is the predominant criterion for seat distribution but without any direct recognition of ethnicity as a political category. So, while some countries use ethnic-institutional, others employ territorial, suggesting that conventional typologies are inadequate to capture the complexity of contemporary federal designs. However, its success ultimately hinges not upon this design but how institutional arrangements interact with political practice to work out inclusion and stability.



3.4. Political Parties and their role towards Federalism

Informal institutions that influence the operation, stability, and evolution of federal systems are political parties. Political parties shape the actual exercise, negotiation, and contestation of political power. To this end, (Riker, 1964) claims that federal systems are formed and sustained through political bargains between territorially organized elites. Besides (Detterbeck, 2016, 2023; Elazar, 1987; Stepan, 1999; Watts, 2008) argue that the functioning of federal systems is determined not only by the constitutional framework but also by the structure of political competition, spatial distribution of parties, and the nature of intergovernmental bargaining. Political party connects formal institutions and political practice and influence how federations operate through decentralized, negotiated, or centralized monopoly.

Territorially based and competitive party systems are important in comparative studies of party politics and federalism. On this, (Riker, 1964) states that the main variable that determines the stability of federal systems is the political parties that link different levels of government and enable bargaining between national and regional elites. Likewise, (Chhibber, & Kollman., 2009) argue that the success of federalism is contingent on the party systems, which can synchronize interests across territorial levels while maintaining regional representation. Furthermore, Stepan (1999) argues that party competition has a major influence on whether federations become 'demos-constrained' or too centralized. Moreover, Chhibber and Kollman (2004) show that the nationalization or regionalization of party systems has direct consequences for the balance of power between the central and regional authorities.

In India, the evolution of federalism is closely associated with the changes in the party system since independence. The dominance of the Indian National Congress (INC) from 1952 to 1967 was so prolonged that (Kothari, 1970) described the political order as 'the Congress system', a centralized and hierarchical system which integrated regional elites into the national order. The dominance of Congress effectively curtailed the autonomy of states by subordinating regional political interests to the central party leadership. As (Brass, 1994) have argued, Congress was an umbrella organization that accommodated regional diversity within a unified national project. Thus, Indian federalism in this period operated less based on autonomous intergovernmental bargaining than on intra-party accommodation managed by the dominant national party.

The rise of regional parties and the breaking of the national party system altered the relationship between the center and state governments. Comparative work by (Chhibber, 1999; Yadav, 1999), Yadav (1999) demonstrates that the rise of regional political parties after the decline of the INC has increased the importance of politics of subnational identities and increased the bargaining capacity of state governments. This process was evident in the coalition period 1989-2014, when national governments increasingly relied



on the regional parties for parliamentary survival. Coalition politics institutionalized negotiated forms of federal governance and augmented the leverage of regional actors in fiscal allocation, policy formation, and intergovernmental relations (Sridharan, 2002). This was the most decentralized period of Indian federalism, as the fragmentation of the party system shifted political authority from the center and towards the states.

The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014 under Narendra Modi, ushered in a new phase of political centralization. Scholars such as (Arora & Kailash, 2018; Sridharan, 2024; Tillin, 2021) argued that the BJP's dominance has affected the balance between national and regional politics. This is because the BJP has reduced the negotiating strength of regional parties by centralizing executive power. Even without major constitutional amendments, centralized political authority can reshape federal dynamics, as evidenced by measures such as the implementation of Goods and Services Tax (GST) and the growing role of centrally sponsored schemes. According to (Chhibber & Verma, 2018), the BJP won electoral victories based on a solidified Hindu majoritarian ideological coalition. Extending this argument on political hegemony, (Sharma & Swenden, 2017) assert that the Modi government has been characterized by rising centralization in Centre–State relations which have produced tensions with state governments led by opposition parties. This altered the practice of federal governance in the party system without formal changes in constitutional structures.

In Ethiopia, before federalization, ethnonational liberation movements such as the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) were instrumental in overthrowing the military regime in 1991 (Yimenu, 2023, pp. 1625–1626). These movements defined political mobilization in terms of questions of self-determination, ethnonational equality, and resistance to centralized domination. Ethiopia's federal system thus founded on ethnic-based political movements and not traditional electoral party competition.

Before 2018, Ethiopian politics were dominated by the EPRDF, a coalition of four ethnically based parties founded by the TPLF, until PM Abiy Ahmed abruptly disbanded it in 2019 to create the Prosperity Party (PP), a nationalized non-ethnic party that combined all regional incumbent parties except for the TPLF, which refused to join the Prosperity Party (PP) (Yimenu, 2023). Nevertheless, the EPRDF created a centralized party-state that subjugated the regional administrations to the ruling coalition despite the formal decentralization of the 1995 Constitution (Aalen, 2011; Vaughan, 2011). The formal decentralization introduced under the 1995 Constitution by EPRDF that established a centralized party-state subordinated the regional governments to the ruling coalition (Aalen, 2011; Vaughan, 2011).



Besides, (Aalen, 2011; Abbink, 2025) argue that the EPRDF tightly controlled regional administrations through democratic centralism, party discipline, and centralized control of political and economic resources. This led to the emergence of what some scholars have called a form of ‘centralized ethnic federalism’, constitutional decentralization, and highly centralized political authority. Ethiopia’s experience suggests that dominant-party structures can undermine the substantive operation of federal arrangements, even when extensive in their constitutional autonomy. EPRDF experience contrasts with Riker’s argument that federalism depends on effective bargaining between autonomous political actors, given that centralized party structure limits regional autonomy and replaced intergovernmental bargaining with hierarchical party control.

The collapse of the EPRDF and the emergence of Prosperity Party were manifestations of an effort to replace the coalition-based ethnic party system with a more centralized nonethnic party system. These reforms transcend ethnic politics that fragment Ethiopian politics towards national unity, whilst also arguing that undermine the institutional foundation of ethnic federalism, thus exacerbating tensions between central actors and different regional levels (Abbink 2025). This is seen in the confrontation between the federal government and Tigray that shows how important political parties are for bringing about federal stability. The crisis exposed that federal relations in Ethiopia have mostly been managed through party structures but the conflict also did not stem merely from the collapse of the ruling coalition, it reflected two different conceptions of federalism: -on one hand Abiy Ahmed's Prosperity Party pushed for a more integrated state; on the other, and other regional players defended their push for greater regional autonomy. It indicates that federal tensions can only erupt in violence when political parties do not properly accommodate and mediate a diversity of territorial interests.

The broader theoretical arguments advanced by Riker (1964), Filippov et al., and the combined insights from the work of scholars such as Riker (1964), Lijphart (1999), and Detterbeck (2016) emphasize how federal systems ultimately depend not just on constitutional design, but also on the regional/territorial-based political competition and power balances in party systems. It is hypothesized that the persistence of competitive and regionally ossified party systems serves to reaffirm intergovernmental bargaining, representation, and democratic accountability, which strengthen federal resilience. Conversely, a decentralized formal constitutional order might be intentionally created; in practice, it is the dominant-party system that places regional parties in the service of a centralized political authority.

Pragmatic federalism argues that a competitive and federalized party system reinforces genuine federalism. As such, federalism becomes more suitable as an instrument of accommodation and a joint political system.



However, where dominant single party monopolizes power, it constrains regional political agencies, making federal arrangements formatively federal but substantively unitary. Both India and Ethiopia thus instruct that the endurance of federal systems, as well as their functionality, is fundamentally the product not only of institutional design but also of shifts in patterns of political competition.

4. CONCLUSION

Federalism in deeply divided societies cannot only be understood as a constitutional allocation of political powers. In both countries, federalism was not a voluntary coming together of previously sovereign units but a state-building strategy in a socially fragmented and politically contested polity. The two federations had very different historical origins, institutional paths, and political trajectories, which led to fundamentally different ways of managing diversity and organizing state structure. The study reveals that the emergence of federalism was closely connected to the imperatives of conflict management, identity accommodation and party system transformation. Indian federal restructuring was achieved by incremental constitutional adaptation, political bargaining, and linguistic accommodation, thus allowing identity-based demands to be accommodated within existing institutional arrangements. Ethiopian federalism, by contrast, was the outcome of revolutionary struggle and was explicitly intended to recognize ethno-nationalities and self-determination. Thus, whereas Indian federalism institutionalized diversity through flexible and asymmetrical arrangements within an integrative constitutional order, Ethiopian federalism constitutionally enshrined ethnicity as the organizing principle of the federal system. Such divergent trajectories suggest that federal systems in divided societies are less a product of abstract constitutional models than of the historical conflicts, political settlements, and identity management from which they emerge.

Both federations adopted territorial autonomy, political representation, and accommodation of distinct identities as mechanisms. However, the success of such arrangements relied largely on conventional political behavior, institutional adaptability, and intergovernmental trust. The Ethiopian case embodies how the constitutionalizing of identity can both demand recognition and exacerbate political competition when constitutional interpretation, along with federal arbitration, is nested within majoritarian ethnic-political institutions. The Indian single polity, in contrast, was frozen by a comparatively adaptable, non-ethnic federal structure that relied on judicial mediation, exhibiting greater political flexibility. However, new trends towards fiscal centralization, executive dominance, and the convergence towards national party centralization are leading to an increasingly authoritarian future.

Federal resilience is determined not only by constitutional decentralization but also by the structure of party systems and the patterns of political rivalry. While the rise of regional parties and coalition politics in India



has led to a greater bargaining power over federalism and better multi-level governance, a recent re-centralization of party system has slowly shifted the balance of federalism in favor of the Union. In Ethiopia, likewise, the formal decentralization envisaged in the constitution was reconfigured by centralized party control under both the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and, later, by the Prosperity Party (PP), with no significant regional political autonomy under democratic federalism. So, party systems can create de facto centralization even in formally decentralized federations.

The survival of federal governments in deeply divided societies is not only constitutional design per se but ongoing interaction between institutional adaptation with changing political reality. Federalism is not an institutional ending place, nor a magic bullet to end identity conflict. Rather, it is a contested, evolving process defined by paths of conflict, intergovernmental negotiations, party behavior, and competing claims of identity among ethnonational groups. Rather than focusing on strict constitutional formalist principles, pragmatic federalism suggests institutional flexibility, institutionalized accommodation of identity, and democratic accountability to address the evolving needs that contemporary federalism aspires to. The different experiences of India and Ethiopia demonstrate that the survival of federal systems depends to a greater extent, not only formal constitutional design or compact-based decentralization, but on the ability of political institutions to sustain legitimacy over time by dealing with competing identities and managing conflict through institutionalized political processes. Thus, with these criticisms in mind, policymakers should accordingly enhance mechanisms of intergovernmental bargaining, nurture integrative political institutions, and incentivize more federalized party systems that can connect national and subnational interests. Future research should investigate how globalization and transnational pressures work through the workings of pragmatic federalism in different federal contexts.

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