CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THE LIMITS OF INSTITUTIONS IN MULTIETHNIC SOCIETIES

States in Africa are known both for their ethnic diversity and for their instability. Frequent reports of ethnic claims and clashes feed the perception of African societies as torn by conflicts rooted in primitive and primordial political forces. Viewed from the outside, African states often appear incapable of handling their ethnic diversity. On closer look, it is apparent that African governments use various strategies to manage ethnicity, both politically and institutionally. In many cases, moreover, governments play an active role in the staging of ethnic politics and conflicts as a way of strengthening their own power bases. So ethnic diversity, with its tensions, is not only a problem and a burden: it can also be an asset in a government’s efforts to consolidate its control of the population.

This book explores one African government’s attempts to manage ethnic diversity: the Ethiopian implementation of ethnically based federalism. Going further than most multiethnic states in Africa and elsewhere, Ethiopia has constitutionally asserted that every ethnic group, or ‘nationality’, within its borders has the right to self-determination, including the right to administer its own territories and even to secede if certain conditions are met (Article 39 of the Ethiopian Constitution). Since the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in 1991 and first introduced the idea of ethnic self-determination, the country has moved from a situation of large-scale conflicts between a centralised state and ethnically based liberation fronts during the previous regimes to a situation of relative stability today. It is, however, equally clear that at the local level, particularly in areas with multiethnic populations, the number of conflicts labelled as ethnic has risen during the last decade. An increasing number of groups have demanded to have their own separate ethnic administrations, detached from larger multiethnic administrative areas.

This is happening in a context of widespread human rights violations and suppression of political opponents, most often linked to electoral processes. Although the right of nationalities to self-determination is
constitutionally safeguarded, it is still the most contested principle in Ethiopian political life. The system of ethnic federalism has been in operation for more than a decade; the burning political question continues to be whether this system is a guarantee of unity, as presented by the EPRDF, or a recipe for disintegration, as argued by the main opposition. This disagreement constitutes the major conflict line between the ruling party and its strongest opponents, and it was the key issue used to mobilise voters in the first genuinely contested election in the country’s history in 2005.

A significant research issue in political science is the question of how multiethnic states should be governed and which measures should be introduced to curb tension between ethnic groups in these societies. Traditionally, political scientists have been preoccupied with the design of institutions as a way of accommodating ethnic diversity. Institutions are seen as defining the rules of the political game and setting the boundaries of the arena in which political competition takes place (Posner 2005). Through constitutional engineering, the political system in a country can be configured to regulate the relationship between minority and majority groups, ensure that all groups are represented in governance of the state, and provide incentives for inter-group cooperation. A central argument of this book, however, is that the formal political institutions of the state are only one determinant of ethnic political mobilisation. Equally important are the informal aspects of politics: the power games of the ruling party and the relations and contestations, past and present, between the various ethnic communities in society and between subgroups within these communities.

The theoretical approach of this book leans on the ‘Africanist’ tradition in political science, a tradition which dates back to the early 1960s with the work of, for instance, Apter (1963) and Austin (1964) on politics in Ghana. Africanists have been deeply influenced by social anthropology’s stress on cultural and historical factors in the understanding of political institutions. Drawing on Geertz (1983), who sees culture as the structures of meaning through which people shape their existence, proponents of this view contend that politics is not mainly embodied in constitutions and institutions but rather constitutes one of the principal arenas in which such structures of meaning publicly unfold. This does not mean that ‘culture’, conventionally defined as ‘customs and cults’, necessarily explains or determines the outcome of political actions. It means instead that explanations of politics should