SHORT COMMUNICATION

THE CONSTITUTIONALITY OF OROMIA COURTS IN ADDIS ABABA CITY: THE IMPEDES

Adane Mandie Damtew*

Abstract

This commentary aims to provide a snapshot of the establishment of Oromia National Regional State's (ONRS) Courts in Addis Ababa City (AAC) and its impediments through a desktop archives review. As the FDRE Constitution under article 49 provides, the residents of AAC shall have a full measure of self-government but the administration shall be responsible to the Federal Government, the Constitution also acknowledges the special interest of the ONRS in Addis Ababa for the notion of the Capital City being located within the State of Oromia. However, recently, practical steps have been taken to establish all levels of ONRS courts in Addis Ababa, this is unconstitutional and lacks the political participation of the City's residents. Despite this, the Federal Government has sent a Draft Criminal Procedure and Evidence Law for approval to the House of Peoples' Representatives, which seems to be granted recognition for the act of ONRS. As the City is a home of various ethnicities, the act of ONRS and the Federal Government to establish courts for a region established based on ethnicity may result in unintended consequences, such as igniting violence and driving the country's politics to widespread unrest.

Keywords: Constitution, Oromia Regional State, Courts, Addis Ababa, Impediments.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1995, Ethiopia has adopted a federal structure with two tiers of government - the federal and regional governments.¹ The federation has eleven regions and two city administrations, Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa.² All governments, including the city administrations, are

^{*} LL.D Candidate, Zhejiang Gongshang University; Lecture of Law, School of Law, University of Gondar. The author would like to thank anonymous reviewers for their genuine and constructive comments.

¹ Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (hereinafter FDRE Constitution), Proclamation, 1995, Proclamation No 1/1995, Federal *Negarit Gazette* Year 1, No.1, Article 50(1).

² *Id.*, Article 47.

autonomous, having their own three arms of government: legislative, executive, and judiciary organs.³

Founded in 1896 during the reign of Emperor Menelik II, Addis Ababa has served as the seat of successive regimes.⁴ The City is growing both demographically and economically.⁵ According to the World Bank report in 2015, the City is the home of a quarter of Ethiopia's urban population and accounts for half of the national economic output.⁶ Both capital and chartered city in nature, Addis Ababa's historical, diplomatic, and political significance for the African continent is immense, serving as the headquarters of major international organizations such as the African Union (AU) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.⁷

Unlike regions whose structure is based based on settlement patterns, language, identity, and consent of the people concerned, Addis Ababa is home to people with multiple identities and diverse ethnic and language backgrounds.⁸ Addis Ababa's residents predominantly speak the Amharic language and have lived peacefully for over a century without any sense of grouping.⁹ Earlier, following the establishment of the federal structure in 1991 under the Transitional Charter of Ethiopia,¹⁰ the AAC was one of the then 14 regional governments.¹¹ However, the 1995 Constitution changed the structure, resulting in lost statehood status but has now an independent and sovereign city structure.

³ Regarding courts' structure, the FDRE Constitution proclaims the establishment of an independent judicial system at the federal and state levels and leaves the detail to subsequent laws. This portrays the Ethiopian judicial system is designed with a parallel court structure in which regions and the federal government have their own independent court structures and administrations. The allocation of powers is made based on subject-matter jurisdiction. Federal courts adjudicate issues of national concern, while state courts are best suited to handle regional matters. The main reason, *inter alia*, for establishing the courts at the federal and regional levels is to ensure the right to access to justice enshrined in the Constitution and international and regional human rights instruments, to which Ethiopia is a party.

⁴ Richard Pankhurst, "Menelik and the Foundation of Addis Ababa", 2 (1) *The Journal of African History*, (1961), at 103-117.

⁵: Erena D. *et al.*, "City profile: Addis Ababa", Report prepared in the SES (Social Inclusion and Energy Management for Informal Urban Settlements, project, funded by the Erasmus+ Program of the European Union, 2017).

⁶ Marew Abebe Salemot, "Draft article threatens Addis Abeba's autonomy", available at: <<u>https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/03/12/draft-article-threatens-addis-abebas-autonomy/</u>> (accessed on 21 September 2022).

⁷ Wubneh, Mulatu, "Addis Ababa, Ethiopia – Africa's diplomatic capital", 35 Cities 35,255-269 (2013).

⁸ FDRE Constitution, *supra* note 1, Article 46/2.

⁹Addis Ababa City Government Revised Charter Proclamation, 2003, Proclamation No 361/2003, Federal Negarit Gazette, Year 9, No. 89, Article 6.

¹⁰ The transitional Charter was adopted in 1991. It provides for the recognition of self-determinative rights, up to and including independence, for the various ethno-nations of Ethiopia.

¹¹Aaron P. Micheau, "The 1991 Transitional Charter of Ethiopia: A New Application of the Self-Determination Principle", 28 Case W. Res. J. Int'l L. (1996), at 367.

According to the Constitution, the City is autonomous but accountable to the Federal Government, and residents have a full constitutional right to self-administration.¹² For the details and to determine particulars – the House of Peoples' Representatives (HPR) has issued AAC Government Charter Proclamation No. 361/2003 (hereafter, the Charter Proclamation). Akin to regions, based on Article 10 of the Charter Proclamation, AAC has established three organs of the government: legislative (the council), executive (the administration), and judiciary (the city court). However, the City has no seat in the Upper House, i.e., the House of Federation, where almost all regions and ethnicities are represented and mandated to interpret the Constitution.¹³ In the last three decades, it is only rarely the residents had the opportunity to elect their City's mayors who belong to the residents of the City.¹⁴ Instead, the Federal Government appoints most mayors affiliated with the Oromo ethnic group.

As AAC is found within the ONRS, shared interests and responsibilities exist between the region and the City administrations. Aiming to manage the interests, the Constitution acknowledges the special interests of ONRS on AAC and refers particulars to be determined by law.¹⁵

Although Article 49(5) of the Constitution recognizes the special interest of ONRS on AAC, some emerging laws interpret the provision in light to the purpose and spirit of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution. Especially Article 25(3) of the Draft Criminal Procedure and Evidence Law (hereafter, the Draft Law)¹⁶ and Articles 24(2) and 24(3)(d) of the Proclamation to redefine the structure, powers, and functions of the ONRS Courts' Proclamation No. 216/2018 (hereafter, ONRS courts proclamation) expressly deprive the sovereignty of AAC, violate vivid provisions of the FDRE Constitution and threatens the federation. It is mainly because powers given to AAC are going to be deprived by ONRS.

¹² FDRE Constitution, *supra* note 1, Article 49/2 & 3.

¹³ *Id*. Article 62/1.

¹⁴ See, Addis Zeybe, available at: <u>https://addiszeybe.com/editorial/the-constitutional-and-political-representation-of-addis-ababans-or-the-lack-thereof</u> (accessed on 20 September 2022).

¹⁵ *Id.*, Article 49/5.

¹⁶ Draft laws in Australia and other common law countries are called bills. A bill becomes an Act—a law—only after it has been passed in identical form by both Houses and signed by the Governor-General (equivalent to the president in Ethiopia).

This paper aims to comment on the constitutionality of ONRS courts in AAC and show the impedes it may cause to the unity and security of the Capital City and the country. To this end, the paper is organized into three parts. The second part explains the relationship between AAC and ONRS in general and the constitutionality of courts that the ONRS claims to establish in AAC. The third section looks at the impediments posed to the country due to the establishment of ONRS courts in AAC. Lastly, concluding remarks are forwarded.

1. ADDIS ABABA'S SOVEREIGNTY VIS-A-VIS OROMIA NATIONAL REGIONAL STATE COURTS IN ADDIS ABABA: LAWFUL?

Although the Constitution empowers AAC to be independent in administration and accountable to the Federal Government, since 2018, the ONRS has been taking concrete steps to establish courts in AAC by pretending to be 'the special interest' stipulated under article 49/5 of the Ethiopian Constitution. However, the spirit of article 49/5 is different from that which ONRS is actually doing at AAC. The provision only puts a milestone for governing the relationship between the City and Oromia region. The provision reads:

The special interest of the State of Oromia in the City, regarding the provision of social services or the utilization of natural resources and other similar matters, as well as joint administrative issues arising from the location of Addis Ababa within the State of Oromia, shall be respected. Particulars shall be determined by law.¹⁷

The provision underscores the protection of ONRS's special interest in specific matters, including (i) the utilization of natural resources and similar issues; (ii) social services; and (iii) joint administration matters. However, contrary to the Constitution and the Charter Proclamation, and without adopting particular laws to determine particulars, the ONRS has made new laws to establish courts in AAC which threaten the City's sovereignty and contradict the basic principle of sovereignty and equality of Regions in Ethiopia.¹⁸ Moreover, the particular laws in the Constitution to determine the relationships between the City and the ONRS are not yet promulgated.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Id*. Article 49/5.

¹⁸ FDRE Constitution, *supra* note 1, Article 46(4).

¹⁹ *Id.* Article 49(5).

The ONRS Court Proclamation stipulates "the region's courts shall have jurisdiction in AAC over matters that affect the interest of the regional government and the crimes commenced within the region's boundary but completed, or the suspects hides, in AAC".²⁰ This provision utterly contradicts the Constitutional provision that enacting a penal code is the power solely given to the House of Peoples' Representatives.²¹ In addition, the law also contradicts the Federal Courts' Proclamation No. 1234/2021 (Hereafter Federal Courts' Proclamation) and AAC's Charter Proclamation.

The Federal Courts' Proclamation empowers AAC courts, *inter alia*, to bench over any disputes subject to the jurisdiction of the City association, civil disputes of money contracts, and loans between individuals up to Birr 500,000 (Five Hundred Thousand Birr).²² It empowers the federal courts to have jurisdiction over residual issues not expressly given to AAC courts.²³Apart from this, it neither empowers nor acknowledges the establishment of ONRS in AAC.

Similar contents are stipulated in criminal matters under the Federal Courts' Proclamation. In addition to reviewing cases related to violations of rules and criminal procedures, and procedure for code-based decisions of search, confession, arrest warrant, inquiry into appeals, and guarantees in appeal, the City Courts are empowered to see offences which can be entertained upon complaints.²⁴ Other criminal matters other than those stated are given to the Federal Courts. This provision also exclusively enables the City and Federal Courts to entertain crimes committed to or resulting in AAC.²⁵

Moreover, the Federal Court's Establishment Proclamation vociferously speaks about the jurisdiction of cases that fall under the dominium of courts of different regions or are committed by persons who permanently reside in more than one state or city administration.²⁶ Accordingly,

²⁰ A Proclamation to Redefine the Structure, Powers and Functions of ONRS Courts, 2018, Proclamation No 216/2018, *Megeleta Oromia*, Year 27, No 7, Article 24 (2 & 3).

²¹ FDRE Constitution, *supra* note 1, Article 55 (5).

 ²² Federal Courts Proclamation, 1995, Proclamation No 1234/21, Federal *Negarit Gazette* Year 27, No. 26, Article 5.
²³ Id.

²⁴ Id., Article 4/16.

²⁵ Id.

²⁶ The Federal Court Proclamation, *supra* note 21, Article 4 (4).

the Proclamation allocates these cases to be a federal matter adjudicated by the federal courts.²⁷ Hence, in any circumstance, ONRS courts have no jurisdiction over matters started in ONRS and completed in AAC and arising and committed in AAC, irrespective of the subject and object of the crime. The sentence stated under article 24/3/d of the ONRS courts' Proclamation is, thus, against the Constitution and the Federal Courts Proclamation and hence illegal.

As a counter-argument, some say AAC lacks its own court structure. However, this does not mean the City's cases failed in a vacuum. Instead, the Federal Courts' Proclamation empowers the City and federal courts to resolve the issues arising out of the City. Besides, advocates of ONRS courts establishment in the City claim it has no seat in the Upper House, where all regions are represented and mandated to interpret the Constitution. Nevertheless, this argument neither adheres to ONRS to establish its courts in the City nor has any bearing on this paper's issue. Moreover, the members of the Upper House have been deemed representatives of the country's Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples. In contrast, Addis Ababa is the home of all Ethiopians and does not need specific representatives in the House.

In addition, the Draft Law, which the Ministry of Justice sent to the HPRs for approval, came up with similar points to the ONRS courts' Proclamation. Article 25(3) of the Draft Law empowers ONRS courts to exercise jurisdiction over some criminal matters. This is also utterly against the federal system, AAC, and courts' jurisdiction (see the next sub-topic). Although the newly established 'Sheger City' surrounds AAC, residents of the City are from different regions and city administrations of Ethiopia.

According to the 2007 population and housing census, the population of Addis Ababa was home to 2,739,551 inhabitants. Of this number, groups from Amhara (47.42%), Oromo (19.51%), and Guragie (16.34%) ranked from one to three (see Table 1). This is an excellent showcase for the AAC, as it is the home of many people from different corners of the country. Thus, empowering ethnically based regions to have jurisdiction over matters of the heterogeneous City would cause unprecedented negative consequences, such as igniting violence among inhabitants from Oromia

²⁷ Id., Article 4/8 & 5/1/h.

and other ethnic groups. It also weakens the unity and peaceful coexistence of the City's communities.

Ethnic Groups	No of Population (both Sex)	Percentage (%)
Affar	3,723	0.135
Amhara	1,299,251	47.42
Guragie	447,777	16.34
Hadiya	16,863	0.61
Harari	6,475	0.23
Oromo	534, 547	19.51
Silitie	80,660	2.94
Somalia	5,595	0.21
Tigrie	169,182	6.17
Wolaita	18,824	0.68
Others	158,654	5.79

Table 1: Number of inhabitants in AAC by major ethnic groups Source: Self-developed

In addition to the above arguments, in accordance with Ethiopian criminal law, criminal matters' jurisdiction²⁸ is established based on the place of commission of the crime or the result that occurred, not on the identity of a person suspected.²⁹ The rationale behind this principle, *inter alia*, is that the punishment imposed on the perpetrator shall give lessons to the offender and the general public, who is affected by the wrongful act of the offender. Article 1 of the 2004 Criminal Code of Ethiopia has a similar objective. However, the Draft Law and ONRS Courts'

²⁸ There are about four principles of jurisdiction in criminal matters. (1) territorial that takes the position that criminal jurisdiction depends upon the place of perpetration. (2) Roman or personal theory makes the perpetrator responsible for his misdeed based on nationality, (3) injured forum emphasizes the crime's effect. (4) cosmopolitan has a position that any nation has jurisdiction over any crime committed anywhere, by anyone (*for more, visit:* Perkins, R.M. (1971) *The territorial principle in criminal law, UC Hastings Scholarship Repository.* Available at: https://repository.uchastings.edu/hastings_law_journal/vol22/iss5/2 (Accessed: 6 April 2023).

²⁹ The Criminal Code of Imperial Ethiopian Government (1961) *Criminal Procedure Code of Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Authority of the Ministry of Pen (Proclamation No.185).

Proclamation appeared with personal theory, which is against the existing Criminal and Criminal Procedure Law which adheres to territorial jurisdiction.

2. THE OROMIA REGIONAL COURTS IN ADDIS ABABA: THE IMPEDIMENTS

The establishment of ONRS courts in AAC has posed several impediments to the overall judicial system of the country. Here are some of them:

2.1 ONRS Court Proclamation and the New Draft Law are Acting against the Country's Federal Structure

AAC is a city administration accountable to the federal government, and the City's residents have full measures of self-governing.³⁰ However, the Draft Law and the ONRS courts' Proclamation empower the ONRS courts to act on matters committed or resulting in Addis Ababa while the ONRS is interested in the issues. Such authorization is a new development in Ethiopia's nearly three decades of federal experience where regions and the two city administrations were equal, at least in principle.³¹ However, the Draft Law and the ONRS Courts' Proclamation go against the existing practice by enabling ONRS to establish courts in a city of all Ethiopians.

The establishment of ONRS courts in AAC violates the right to self-governance of AAC and warrants some inequality among the federation States and Cities. Interfering on the issues of a Constitutionally autonomous city contradicts the principle of 'independence' enshrined in the Constitution. The laws utterly disregarded other regions' interests and gave privileges only to ONRS, which is against the equality of the federation's member states. Such ignorance affects other regions, particularly those with properties in Addis Ababa. For instance, the Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) has branches for Amhara Mass Media and Amhara Credit and Saving Institution (now elevated to Tsedey Bank) but cannot establish courts in AAC to adjudicate cases arising from its properties. Thus, the laws shall disallow all regions to establish courts in AAC or respect the equality of all federation members. Moreover, the federal government is there to protect all states' interests, including ONRS. In light of this, there should not be regional courts in Addis.

³⁰ FDRE Constitution, *supra* note 1, Article 49 (2&3).

³¹ Wondwossen Demissie, Questioning Jurisdiction of Oromia Courts over Crimes Committed in Addis Ababa, *Ethiopian reporter (English)*, 30 January 2021. available at: <<u>https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/</u><u>questioning-jurisdiction-oromia-courts-over-crimes-committed-addis-ababa/</u>> (accessed on 22nd September 2022).

2.2 Establishing ONRS Courts in AAC Contradicts International Laws that Ethiopia is a Party to

International Human Rights Instruments (IHRIs) are preachers of equality of all human beings from birth to death. Contrary to this, the Draft Law and ONRS Courts' Proclamation develop discriminatory provisions allowing the establishment of ethnic-based regional courts in a City where heterogeneous peoples reside. The specific provisions of the following two well-known IHRIs (ICCPR and ICESCEs) are excellent examples to show the wrongfulness of the draft law.

The provision of ICCPR reads:

Each state party to the present Covenant undertakes to respect and to ensure to all individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction the rights recognized in the present Covenant without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, property, birth, or other grounds.³²

As Ethiopia is among the signatory party to the convention, it is obliged to ensure and secure equal rights of the citizen enshrined in the convention.³³ To do so, this provision is pivotal, especially to secure the protection of rights, such as the right to justice, without discrimination on the ground, *inter alia*, social origin, or race.³⁴ This follows from the fact that the 'rules concerning the basic rights of the human person' are *erga omnes* obligations and that, as indicated in the fourth preambular paragraph of the Covenant, there is a United Nations Charter obligation to promote universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms.³⁵ Despite this, the Draft Law and ONRS Courts' Proclamation deprives the convention by creating distinction among ethnically based regions for providing justice by favouring ONRS to establish its courts in AAC but not for other regions.

³² UN General Assembly, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 16 December 1966, United Nations, Treaty Series, Vol. 999, 171, Article 2.

³³ Ethiopia ratified ICCPR on 11 June 1993.

³⁴ Paul M. Taylor, Article 2: To 'Respect and to Ensure' Covenant Rights, in commentary on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: The UN Human Rights Committee's Monitoring of ICCPR Rights, 58-86 ³⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2004) General comment no. 31 [80], the nature of the general legal obligation imposed on States parties to the Covenant, Refworld, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/478b26ae2.html (Accessed on 7 April 2022).

The provision of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCRs) reads: All peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right, they freely determine their political status and pursue economic, social, and cultural development.³⁶

More importantly, the people of AAC have just, fair, and equal rights to justice, enshrined under the Constitution, the 2004 Criminal Code, and other domestic and international laws. Moreover, the problem is also in the mindset of the people, where, in the current regional structure, it is hard to find an individual who believes that s/he will get fair and accessible justice from other regional courts while s/he resides in AAC.

2.3 The Act of ONRS is Ultra-Virus

The main reason ONRS raised to establish courts in AAC is the phraseology 'special interest given to the region' stipulated under Article 49/5 of the Constitution. However, the establishment of ONRS courts in AAC is not on the list of issues ONRS has a special interest in AAC. The provision also anticipated a specific law determining "particulars" would be promulgated, albeit no law has been enacted yet.³⁷ Hence, establishing ONRS courts based on the non-existence of power and in the absence of particular laws is ultra-virus because the region exceeds the scope of the given privilege and power. Besides, no matter how generously the provision might be interpreted, it would not authorize an apportioning part of the AAC courts and the federal government's judicial power to ONRS.³⁸ Hence, acting against this constitutional provision is dangerous and may wither the flower (Addis Ababa's flower).

2.4 In the Current Federal Structure, a Person (Both Physical and Legal Person) Living in another Region is Governed under the Laws and Courts of the Area Where S/He/it is Residing. So, Why Does ONRS Want to Move Out of this Norm and Establish its Own Courts Outside its Jurisdiction in Addis Ababa?

³⁶ UN General Assembly, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, United Nations, Treaty Series, Vol. 993, (16 December 1966), at 3.

³⁷ Wondwossen, *supra* note 31.

³⁸ Id.

In Ethiopia, courts jurisdiction of regions, the two city administrations, and the federal government differ based on the type of matter and the place of commission of the crime and the result obtained, and, in rare circumstances, the identity of persons.³⁹ One of them is not allowed to interfere in the judicial matters of others. This is because Article 52 of the Constitution empowers federation members to maintain order within their jurisdiction. AAC shall maintain its peace and order as a federation member without regional or federal government interference. However, what the Draft Law and ONRS court's Proclamation are doing is utterly against the rule in the internal matters of AAC.

2.5 The Regional Structure in Ethiopia has Not Yet been Finalized

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This commentary has attempted to show the relationship between AAC and ONRS and the impediment due to the establishment of the ONRS courts in AAC. Regarding the relationship between AAC and ONRS, the Constitution vociferously acknowledges equal and horizontal relationships. Besides, despite the *defacto* claim of ONRS as a '*part*' of Oromia, there needs to be a clear *desire* for '*part*' recognition, i.e., the federal Constitution nowhere provides that AAC is part of ONRS. Under the FDRE Constitution, finding any provision that authorizes regions to establish courts in AAC is hard. While the constitutional phraseology of Article 49/5 '*Special*

³⁹ The Federal Courts Proclamation, *supra* note 21, Articles 4 (4) & 4 (16).

interest' is ambiguous and subject to various interpretations, it does not specify the establishment of ONRS courts in AAC, suggesting any enactment in doing so is entirely unconstitutional and ultra-virus.

The ONRS is now interfering in the judicial affairs of a self-administering City by establishing courts in AAC. Thus, AAC shall request an end of intervention based on Article 49/2 of the Constitution, and the federal government shall give sustainable solutions for the interferences. Amid the solutions, making laws that determine 'the special interest of ONRS' is the best panacea. However, in the law-making process, the HPR shall be pretty sure of the participation of pertinent bodies, especially the federation states and city administrations. The two federal houses shall also play crucial roles in the prevalence of the rule of law and constitutional supremacy/discipline.

The HPR shall reject Article 25(3) of the Draft Law before approving it. Optionally, if HPR sustained the provision, the scope shall be broadened, allowing other regions and city administrations to have similar jurisdiction over the capital, thereby guaranteeing logical consistency and equal treatment of states.