



## BRIEFING PAPER

# REFERENDUM IN ETHIOPIA'S SOUTHERN REGION

MARCH 2023

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On 6 February, six zones and five special woredas<sup>2</sup> in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPR) held a referendum on statehood to determine whether the zones – Wolayta, Gamo, Gofa, South Omo, Gedeo and Konso – and special woredas – Derashe, Amaro, Burji, Basketo and Ale – will form a separate autonomous state or remain within the SNNPR. This was the third such referendum on statehood to be held in the region since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018.

During the third week of February, Ethiopia's National Electoral Board (NEBE) declared the approved results of the referendum of all zones and special woredas except Wolayta.<sup>3</sup> All those that have declared voted overwhelmingly in favour of separate statehood. If it now comes into being, the proposed South Ethiopia Regional State will be the third new state to separate from the SNNPR through a referendum since the creation of the region in 1994. The referendum, and the formation of the new state, will have significant implications for the fate of the SNNPR, Ethiopia's ethnolinguistic federal arrangement and the ethnic groups that will form the new region.

## HANDLING DEMANDS FOR STATEHOOD

Since 2018, thirteen zonal councils – Sidama, Kaffa, Gurage, Bench-Maji, Hadiya, Dawro, Gamo, Wolayta, West Omo, Kembata-Tembaro, Gofa, South Omo and Gedeo – have submitted a request to the SNNPR council to form their own new states. However, following the formation of Sidama state in June 2020, the majority of requests were not immediately dealt with. Instead, they were transferred to the House of Federation to consider a way forward. The now defunct regional ruling party, the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) – formerly a part of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) ruling coalition – side-lined the constitutional mechanism and instead

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2 Special woredas – known in Amharic as *Liyu* woredas – were established in the context of the SNNPR to accommodate the demand for self-rule by smaller ethnic groups. They answer directly to the state council. A regular woreda is simply an administrative tier below a zone.

3 In Wolayta, NEBE said that so many irregularities were found in the electoral process that the results were delayed to carry out proper investigations only to be entirely invalidated later.

established a task force to conduct a ‘scientific study’ on the growing demands for statehood.<sup>4</sup>

In July 2019, a report by the task force proposed three possible options for the future of the SNNPR: 1) leaving the SNNPR as it was; 2) dividing it in two (Sidama state and the rest); and 3) freezing all demands for statehood indefinitely. The report claimed that a majority of the region’s population wanted to carry on living under the SNNPR, but it failed to achieve consensus on the three proposals amongst regional elites. Eventually, the federal and regional governments seem to have decided that the SNNPR should be divided into four regional states, including Sidama.

The zonal councils of Wolayta, Gamo, Gofa, South Omo, Gedeo and Konso voted by more than two-thirds in favour of their own autonomous statehood referendums to form separate states. However, the regional and federal governments, which were keen to avoid having multiple states in the south organized along ethno-linguistic lines, convinced them – apart from Wolayta (and perhaps Gurage) – to be clustered together and request a referendum for a single region. Being mostly smaller in size and population than Sidama, the zones and the special woredas appeared to have made a significant strategic and practical calculation.



### INTRA-REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The SNNPR was created out of the five regions – seven, eight, nine, ten and eleven – of Ethiopia’s transitional period that pre-existed the adoption of the current constitution in 1995. Instead of presenting the proposal for the amalgamation of the five regions to their populations for consultation or referendum, the EPRDF made a decision to merge the regional political parties into the new SEPDM and the five regions into the SNNPR.

Over the years, the SNNPR faced many sub-regional demands for self-determination, territorial autonomy and devolved administrative status, which weren’t properly addressed. Instead, in 2011, the regional state council merged some woredas and special woredas into the newly created Segen Area People’s Zone.<sup>5</sup> This caused grievances, particularly amongst the Konso, who lost their special woreda status, causing a violent conflict.

Based on a 2018 study it carried out, the regional government set out to make administrative changes that would respond to some of the longstanding demands for self-determination. This led to Halaba Special Woreda being granted zonal status; Gamo Gofa Zone was split into Gamo and Gofa ethnic administrative

4 Kjetil Tronvoll, Filata Boroje and Kairedin Tezera, ‘The Sidama’s quest for self-rule: A study of the referendum on regional statehood, European Institute of Peace, January 2020, <https://www.eip.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Sidamas-quest-for-self-rule.pdf>

5 The merger, break-up or creation of additional administrative hierarchy has been handled by the SNNPR State Council or the Council of Nationalities (CoN) in accordance with the specific nature of each demand. The SNNPR constitution states that the CoN is the second legislative branch of the SNNPR in which each ethnic group is represented relative to population size. It has the constitutional powers to decide on demands of ethnic groups to form their own zone or special woreda as well as finding solutions for disputes between administrative units.

zones; and Konso woreda of the Segen Area People's Zone was also granted zonal status following persistent demands by the concerned ethnic communities for higher administrative status. Later, after the separation of the Konso, the SNNPR was forced to dissolve the ethnically diverse Segen Area People's Zone and grant Amaro, Burji, Derashe and Ale woredas the status of special woreda.<sup>6</sup>

The Ethiopian constitution is unusual in that it grants subnational units – nations, nationalities and peoples – the constitutional right to form their own new regional states.<sup>7</sup> Since 2018, several ethnic groups in the SNNPR invoked this right at a time when the ruling EPRDF was weakened amid internal political rivalry and external pressures. After political and legal manoeuvring, the federal government and the regional government of SNNPR organized two statehood referendums that resulted in the formation of Sidama State in 2020, and Southwest Ethiopia Peoples' State in 2022, the latter composed of Bench Sheko, Sheka, Kaffa, West Omo and Dawro zones and Konta Special Woreda.

The Sidama referendum was the beginning of the unravelling of the multi-ethnic SNNPR. The statehood referendums for Sidama State and Southwest Ethiopia Peoples' State represented a major break from the past. Following delays in the organization of the referendum, Sidama zone politicians and activists threatened to unilaterally declare the formation of Sidama state. This led to violent clashes between federal government security forces and Sidama activists and protesters as well as ethnically-targeted killings in which more than a dozen people were killed.<sup>8</sup> Later, Sidama politicians agreed to wait for the referendum to be conducted by the election board, thereby helping to lessen the prospect of further violence in the zone. With the formation of two new states already, and potentially a third and fourth in 2023, it could be said that the federal government has mostly avoided a chaotic and disorderly disintegration of the SNNPR.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas the administrative reconfiguration of the region has guaranteed more autonomy to several administrative units and ethnic groups, the rights of other ethnic minorities are under increased threat. There hasn't been a serious negotiation between the SNNPR and the new states over the rights of minority groups. The national electoral board had, for instance, asked the Sidama regional government to adopt a legal framework to show that it would guarantee and protect the rights of ethnic minorities, especially in the multi-ethnic Hawasa city, but the new Sidama authorities pushed back, claiming that all ethnic minorities would have the same rights and protections as in other regions.

With more than 56 ethnic groups, the SNNPR was previously the most ethnically diverse state in the country. The reconfiguration over the last four years has changed the administrative and political landscape of the region. Due to the large number of administrative units and ethnic groups, the statehood referendum for the formation of South Ethiopia State, and its aftermath, is significantly more complex than the referendum in the Sidama region, which is mainly populated by the Sidama – Ethiopia's fifth largest ethnic group – and as complex as Southwest Ethiopia Peoples' State.

If all zones and special woredas – including Wolayta zone, the fate of which is still undecided – form the new South Ethiopia Peoples State, the new region will be carved out of 11 administrative units and several ethnic groups. In the new state, there will be no single ethnic group constituting more than 50 per cent of the population, with the Wolayta (if they decide to join) being the largest.

The remaining six sub-regional units in SNNPR – Hadiya, Halaba, Kembata-Tembaro, Gurage, and Siltie zones and Yem Special Woreda – had also requested statehood referendums separately, but later they accepted the clustering proposal of the government and agreed to merge into one region. The House of

6 Kulle Kursha, 'Segen Shambles Shows Sense in Splitting South', *Ethiopia Insight*, 30 December 2018, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/12/30/segan-shambles-shows-sense-in-splitting-south/>

7 See article 39 of the 1994 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Constitution.

8 'At Least 17 Killed in Violence Over Sidama Autonomy', *Al Jazeera*, 20 July 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/7/20/ethiopia-at-least-17-killed-in-violence-over-sidama-autonomy>

9 The violence in Sidama and Wolayta zones is the exception to this.

Federation therefore decided that they would remain together under the remaining SNNPR but with a different name – possibly Central Ethiopia State – without the need to conduct a statehood referendum.<sup>10</sup> In line with this, the SNNPR government has stated that it would amend the regional constitution to fit into the proposed Central Ethiopia State. The Gurage zone, however, has still insisted on its previous decision to hold a separate referendum for its own separate state and submitted its rejection of the proposed Central Ethiopia State to the House of Federation in August 2022. Unlike other zones, the Gurage zone passed the decision with a narrow majority.

At the time of writing, Gurage zone hasn't changed its stance on its demand for separate statehood, and sporadic popular protests – especially in the zone's capital, Wolkite – that started in the middle of 2022, have continued. In November 2022, government security forces detained several dozen youths in Wolkite following a day-long strike. Since then, Wolkite town has been under a *de facto* state of emergency imposed by the regional government. Again, in March 2023, several Gurage zone officials, local politicians, activists, and youth were arrested in a major security crackdown.<sup>11</sup> Amidst the Gurage resistance, the formation of a new opposition political party called Gurage Unity and Justice Party,<sup>12</sup> which claims to fight for Gurage's own statehood, was announced in March 2023. This may further strengthen Gurage ethno-nationalism and the push for statehood.

The fact that government security forces used heavy-handed actions to suppress dissent in the zone, and that no statehood referendum is planned for the sub-regional units of the proposed Central Ethiopia State, will increase the frustration of the Gurage. The Gurage zone dilemma is also compounded by the fact that four of its woredas – Mareko, Qebena, Mesqan and Misraq Mesqan – and Butajira municipality, decided to join the other administrative sub-units to form the proposed Central Ethiopia State, thereby rejecting the decision of the zonal council and submitted their request to the House of Federation.<sup>13</sup> Whether the House of Federation will decide to merge the aforementioned sub-units of Gurage zone with the proposed Central Ethiopia State by separating them from Gurage zone without a referendum, which may raise a serious constitutional issues, remains to be seen.

## WINNERS AND LOSERS

There are winners and losers in this ongoing new reconfiguration of the SNNPR. The state-owning ethnic groups of the Sidama, ethnic groups of the Southwest Ethiopia Peoples' State, and those ethnic groups that may possibly form the South Ethiopia State and Central Ethiopia State, will benefit from greater autonomy under the federal constitution, including powers to manage their own resources and deliver services to their populations. Ethnic groups that had special woreda status under SNNPR, and those minority ethnic groups that didn't exercise self-rule at a special woreda level, may get a zonal administrative hierarchy. Besides, all state-owning ethnic groups will have their own state constitutions, legislative state councils and police, and powers over taxation, education and land administration. With regard to taxation, in January 2023, the joint session of the federal parliaments granted the new power of property taxation to

10 'House Orders Holding of Referendum for Establishment of New Region in SNNP', *Ethiopian News Agency*, 18 August, 2022, <https://www.ena.et/en/?p=37874>

11 'Security Forces Arrest Several Senior Government Officials, Youth, Activists in Gurage Zone Following Intensified Crackdown on Dissent', *Addis Standard*, March 2023, <https://addisstandard.com/news-security-forces-arrest-several-senior-govt-officials-youth-activists-in-gurage-zone-following-intensified-crackdown-on-dissent/>

12 'GOGOT Party Announces Plans to Realize Demand of Gurages for Statehood' (Translation from Amharic), *Ethiopia Insider*, 13 March 2023, <https://ethiopiainsider.com/2023/10016/>

13 'Councils of Four Woreda and One Municipality Administrations of the Gurage Zone Approved the Proposed Cluster Restructuring of the SNNPR,' *Ethiopia Insider*, 13 August 2022, <https://ethiopiainsider.com/2022/7616/>. This in part explains the fact that there have been some unresolved demands for self-administration by some identities. Gurage zone has 16 woredas, and during the August 2022 zonal council meeting the representatives of the four woredas opposed the idea of separate statehood.

regional states.<sup>14</sup> The elites of the new states will also enjoy greater access to civil service jobs, political positions, regional budgets and federal subsidies.

Being the dominant ethnic group in Sidama State, the Sidama will enjoy more powers and rights than their counterparts in other new states in terms of federal subsidy transfers and political representation at regional and federal levels. Besides, the Sidama forced the federal government to accept their demand for separate statehood and secured their claim over the multi-ethnic regional capital, Hawasa. While actual benefits to the people are difficult to gauge, the Sidama and the ruling elite are currently the major winners from the reconfiguration of the region.

On the other hand, the Wolayta elites might appear to have lost out. Firstly, despite aggressive mobilization and campaigning, the federal government forced them to renounce their demand for statehood. Secondly, the regional capital, Hawasa, where many ethnic Wolayta live and have a strong economic presence, went to their rivals, the Sidama.<sup>15</sup> The Wolayta were also victims of the violence that erupted in Hawasa and other towns in Sidama zone in the lead up to the Sidama referendum.<sup>16</sup>

Should the new South Ethiopia State be formed, and Wolayta decides to join it, the zone's well-developed capital city, Soddo, may become a candidate for the new capital, although the equally well-developed city of Arba Minch, in the Gamo zone, will also be a competitor. To accommodate competing demands of the constituent zones, the Southwest Ethiopia regional government decided to have four regional capital cities with equal status, namely Bonga, Mizan Aman, Tercha and Tepi. Given this precedent, the new South Ethiopia State may choose two or more capital cities. South Ethiopia State may also have to accommodate the demands of its constituent units by choosing two or more capital cities.

In the case of South Ethiopia State, the current Gedeo Zone – bordered by Sidama and Oromia regions – will be an administrative anomaly. This is because the zone, which voted overwhelmingly to join South Ethiopia State, doesn't share a border with the region. The zone's land linkage with the SNNPR was cut when Sidama zone became a separate state. Therefore, the zone's territorial isolation will pose a big challenge for the Gedeo people as well as the new regional state, affecting many aspects of the zone's administration, socio-economic development and its relationship with the new region.

Newly-formed states will have smaller populations and occupy less territory, as well as commanding fewer economic resources compared to the SNNPR. For these reasons, they will have a diminished political and economic leverage over the federal government.

## POTENTIAL CONFLICT HOTSPOTS

After long delays, and with the exception of Sidama, the way the regional and federal governments have handled the demands for statehood has been relatively smooth and peaceful. The federal and regional governments and the electoral board seem to have learned lessons from the previous two referendums in Sidama and Southwest Ethiopia Peoples' State. However, there were some areas where tensions around the referendum were expected to be high, but ultimately these fears were not realized.

14 'Joint Legislative Grant Regional States Edict Property Taxes', *Addis Fortune*, 14 January 2023, <https://addisfortune.news/joint-legislative-grant-regional-states-edict-property-taxes/>

15 The Sidama and Wolayta had territorial disputes in the Lake Abaya area on which the regional council ruled in favour of the Sidama. This remains a source of tension. See Beza Desalegn and Nigussie Afesha, 'The Quest for identity and Self-Determination in the SNNP Region of Ethiopia', *Mizan Law Review* 13/1 (2019), <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/mlr/article/view/192024>

16 'Stains Down South: Ethiopia's National Reforms Rouse Local Tensions', *African Arguments*, June 19, 2018, <https://africanarguments.org/2018/06/strains-south-ethiopia-national-reforms-rouse-local-tensions-snnpr>

## ● WOLAYTA ZONE

While the five zones and five special woredas gave in to political pressure and decided to hold a referendum for one new state, the Wolayta zonal council originally insisted on a separate referendum and threatened a unilateral declaration of statehood if this was not granted. This led to a crackdown by federal security forces against the Wolayta zone leaders and activists that resulted in the arrest of several people, including the then administrator of the zone, Dagato Kumbe, and the killing of several protesters in August 2020 by government forces.<sup>17</sup> After several months, the Wolayta zonal council gave in by reversing its decision and agreed to join the other zones and special woredas to form one state.

Having been highly mobilized for an autonomous Wolayta state, there were fears that violence might erupt during or after the referendum because of the expectation that some Wolayta activists and politicians would try to influence the voters to vote 'no' for the proposed South Ethiopia State or disrupt the process. In February, these fears were realized when the electoral board invalidated the referendum results in Wolayta zone, as well as the voter registration that preceded it, alleging serious illegalities and improprieties.<sup>18</sup> Subsequently, the electoral board decided to organize a second-round of registration and repeat the referendum in the zone at some point in the future. Until this takes place, the fate of the zone will remain uncertain.

## ● DERASHE AND KONSO SPECIAL WOREDAS

In recent years there have been a number of local, intercommunal conflicts in and between many of the administrative units that are due to hold statehood referendums. This includes violence between the Konso and Derasha and between Konso and Ale ethnic communities in Konso Zone (Ale Special Woreda was created by taking territories from the former Konso and Derashe special woredas) and neighbouring ethnic communities. The cause of most of these conflicts and violence is related to disputes over administrative structures and incompatible economic and political interests among local elites. The Derashe Special Woreda has also been a scene of violence in connection with a demand for a zonal administrative structure. Following an operation by federal security forces last year, there has been a marked decline in violence. However, Derashe was expected to be another hotspot during the recent referendum with local elites potentially using the opportunity to advance their own interests. According to reports from the electoral board however, there was no major security challenge during or after the referendum.

## ● SOUTH OMO ZONE

In April 2022, there was unrest amongst the Ari ethnic group – the largest group in South Omo zone – leading to the deployment of federal and regional forces.<sup>19</sup> The cause of the unrest was the unaddressed request by four Ari woredas for a separate zonal administrative structure. The Ari woredas were seen as potential hotspots in connection with the referendum but according to the election board the referendum went smoothly.

17 'At least 17 killed in political unrest in southern Ethiopia', *Washington Post*, 13 August 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/at-least-17-killed-in-political-unrest-in-southern-ethiopia/2020/08/13/e0506862-dd80-11ea-b4f1-25b762cdbbf4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/at-least-17-killed-in-political-unrest-in-southern-ethiopia/2020/08/13/e0506862-dd80-11ea-b4f1-25b762cdbbf4_story.html)

18 'A Slew of Flaws in Wolayita Zone Referendum Leaves Outcome Uncertain', *The Reporter*, 4 March 2023, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/31733/>

19 'Analysis: Uneasy calm returns in Jinka, environs; more than 130 detained after days of unrest leaves trail of displacement, property destruction', *Addis Standard*, April 2022, <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-uneasy-calm-returns-in-jinka-environs-more-than-30-detained-after-days-of-unrest-leaves-trail-of-displacement-property-destruction/>

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FEDERAL SYSTEM

The reconfiguration of the SNNPR will have implications for the future of sub-state nationalisms and statehood claims country-wide, as well as constitutional reform. The federal constitution grants all nations, nationalities and peoples the right to a ‘full measure of self-government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation in state and federal governments’, and furthermore ‘the right to establish, at any time, their own states’ under the federation.<sup>20</sup> The flurry of demands for statehood could be seen as evidence for ‘demand for a greater devolution of power’ under the hitherto tightly-controlled ethnic federal system.<sup>21</sup>

Over the last quarter of a century, the Sidama and Wolayta have seen strong ethno-nationalistic mobilization. In fact, the Sidama’s quest for autonomy goes well beyond the current ethno-regional federal arrangement. Wolayta nationalism also gathered momentum in the late 1990s when the Wolayta rejected the federal government’s linguistic scheme of WOGAGODA that attempted to introduce a new language for the Wolayta, Gamo, Gofa and Dawro ethnic groups. The Wolayta secured zonal status separately from the former North Omo zone and it can be argued that the new reconfiguration has emboldened the Sidama and Wolayta sub-state nationalisms both politically and culturally.

Many ethnic groups of the new states which had special woreda administrations – for instance, the Derashe, Amaro, Burji, Ale and Basketo in the case of the South Ethiopia State, and the Yem ethnic group in the case of the future Central Ethiopia State – may get zonal administrative structures that will in turn increase their access to resources and political power. In the context of the SNNPR, special woredas and zones are considered as administrative hierarchies established to accommodate ethnic minorities, whereas a regular woreda is a decentralized administrative tier that isn’t necessarily associated with the self-administration right of a given ethnicity. New demands for woreda, special woreda and zonal administrative structures may also proliferate at sub-regional level as forming a new state won’t address all problems, including demands for self-rule and equitable representation and effective participation. The new states will likely confront the same challenge of how to ensure effective participation and equitable representation of all ethnic groups at regional and sub-regional levels, as was the case in the SNNPR. New demands for territorial re-demarcation and even the quest for recognition of distinct identities may increase. The diverse nature of the new states makes this inevitable because in theory all ethnic groups are entitled to establish their own ethnic administrations.

One of the direct effects of the Sidama statehood was that it emboldened the demand for separate statehood by the Wolayta and the Gurage ethnic groups. While the Wolayta statehood demand has been subdued by force (for now), the Gurage demand for statehood and ethnonationalism remains alive. It is highly likely that the Gurage will pursue their demand for a separate state in the future, which in turn will create more tension and conflict between Gurage politicians, protesters and activists on the one hand and government security forces on the other, as was the case for the ethnic Wolayta protesters. Given the experience of the Wolayta, the Gurage may be forced by the federal government to abandon their statehood demand and decide to join other

20 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b5a84.html>

21 Hilary Matfess, ‘Sidama Statehood Vote Throws a Wrench in Abiy Ahmed’s Plans for Ethiopia’, *Foreign Policy*, 6 December 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/06/referendum-ethnic-sidama-throws-a-wrench-in-abiy-ahmed-plans-for-ethiopia>

ethnic groups to form one regional state.<sup>22</sup> Until the Gurage zonal council changes its decision, the decision of the House of Federation to incorporate them with the proposed Central Ethiopia State will remain a clear violation of the Gurage's constitutional right of statehood enshrined both in the SNNPR and federal constitutions.

Politically speaking, the now defunct SEPDM secured the position of prime minister when Hailemariam Desalegn – a Wolayta and the then chairman of SEPDM – succeeded the late Meles Zenawi in 2012 – a position he held until 2018. The choice of Hailemariam as prime minister by the then EPRDF was seen as a compromise that avoided a potential power rivalry between the Oromo, Amhara and Tigray regional constituent parties of the EPRDF coalition. Thus, the southern party and the regional elites were instrumental in offsetting power competition between the three largest ethnic groups, which increased their leverage at the federal level. Within the ruling Prosperity Party and the federal government, political power is largely held by the Oromo, Amhara and the newly-empowered Somali elites who have essentially replaced the southern elites in the political hierarchy of Ethiopia's federal states. Therefore, the disintegration of SNNPR means that the regional elites have lost their collective bargaining power over the federal government and ruling party.

Whether the reconfiguration of the SNNPR and disintegration into several new states will trigger statehood demands in other regional states of the Ethiopian ethno-regional federation remains to be seen. Being a home to more than 80 ethnic groups, a population of over 110 million and having a constitution that grants every ethnic group the right to statehood, the fact that Ethiopia has had nine regional states for over a quarter of a century seems unusual. Given the size of the country and some of the regional states, the formation of more regional states based on legitimate popular demands may help ease recurrent competition and conflict among the various ethnic groups currently uneasily co-existing in multi-ethnic states.

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<sup>22</sup> The current president of the SNNPR, Restu Yirdaw, hails from Gurage ethnicity but he officially favours the government proposal for the zones to form one region together with other zones. Million Mathewos, his predecessor from Sidama ethnic group, openly favoured the Sidama statehood quest.