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The Challenge of Establishing Non-Partisan Research Service in the Ethiopian Parliament

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1. Introduction

Ethiopia is an ancient country with a history of 3000 years. It is located in the northeastern part of Africa with the size of about 1.1 million square kilometers. Ethiopia has about 67 million people who speak 80 languages and 200 dialects. In addition to the rich culture, this ancient country is also regarded as the cradle of mankind. The discovery of Lucy (Denqenesh), female hominid of 3.2 million years old, and other recent discoveries have shown that Ethiopia is the first home of mankind. Importantly, Ethiopia was never colonized, despite several attempts by colonial powers including Italy, which was defeated at the battle of Adwa in 1896.

The first written constitution of Ethiopia was promulgated by Emperor Haile Selassie in July 1931. This constitution introduced the first parliament in the long history of Ethiopia. This bicameral form of Parliament was not democratic but was in place until 1974 when the Emperor was overthrown by the military junta. In its true sense there was no parliament in Ethiopia between 1974 and 1994.

In 1991, the military regime was overthrown by the Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Revolutionary Front (EPRDF). A new constitution was drafted and adopted on December 8, 1994. The new constitution organizes Ethiopia into a federal system based on "settlement pattern, identity, language and consent of the governed". The Constitution also provides a parliamentary form of government. Accordingly, there are two Houses: The House of Peoples' Representatives and The House of the Federation. The House of Peoples' Representatives is the sole legislative body. Members of the House of Peoples' Representatives are elected by plurality vote from districts and serve five-year terms. The districts are based on population with the provision that at least twenty of the 550 seats shall be reserved for minority nationalities. The House of the Federation provides guidance on all constitutional matters. It also has the power to resolve disputes between the regions, to determine the division of revenues between the two levels of government that derive from joint sources and to allocate federal subsidies among the regional governments.

2. The Establishment of the Research and Documentation Center of the Ethiopian Parliament

The existence of a parliamentary system in a given country is considered to be an important step in the process of ensuring democracy and good governance. However, such parliaments may range from mere passive symbols to active and potentially challenging institutions regarding political ISSUES and in the socio-economic sphere of a country. Some parliaments are weak because they are given nominal responsibilities due to undemocratic opinion of governments. Others are weak not because the political environment is unfavourable but because they lack performance capacity.

The extent of participation in various parliaments by its members also varies following the nature and strength of each parliament. Some members reflect their ideological opinions regardless of the tangible facts just to remain tuned to a given political affiliation. Others "agree" on a given bill not because they are convinced but are deliberately made to be "convinced" due to lack of information from independent or neutral sources.

In the case of nominal parliaments constrained by undemocratic governments, the effort focuses on creating the enabling environment, and it is a challenge to bring basic changes on the opinion of a given government. But, provided that the Constitution of a country genuinely grants the parliament the power to exercise its duties and responsibilities unreservedly, and provided that the existing government practically supports the exercise of this power, then the issue is one of strengthening the capacity of that parliament.

The independence and strength of parliaments can also be evaluated by the composition, number and quality of its staff as well as its readiness to entertain independent advisory services and information sources. This virtually helps the parliament to decide on issues on which it has been well informed. To this end, Barry Jones, a former Australian Minister, said that "*... the effective working of democracy depends on the availability of adequate information and the capacity for its independent evaluation...*". Jones considers such access as an important contributor in the process of restoring the significance of a parliament [Verrier, 1995:2].

The members of the parliament, no doubt, are elected from the various strata of the society and they themselves come from different professions. As a result of this they may have no full array of information about the socio-economic performance of the country. Hence, a parliament may:

- Accept eloquently delivered reports of the executive body about its performance for good;
- At best pass bills without proper amendments; at worst, pass wrong bills; and
- In extreme cases, blame the executive branch wrongly and cause grave misunderstandings due to lack of genuine information and responsible advisory service.

It is apparent, therefore, that the existence of supportive services that directly contribute to the effective functioning of parliament are indispensable.

Such services include various research, policy analysis, commentary, advices on policy options to MPs regardless of policy parameters of the party in power, opposition and interested groups.

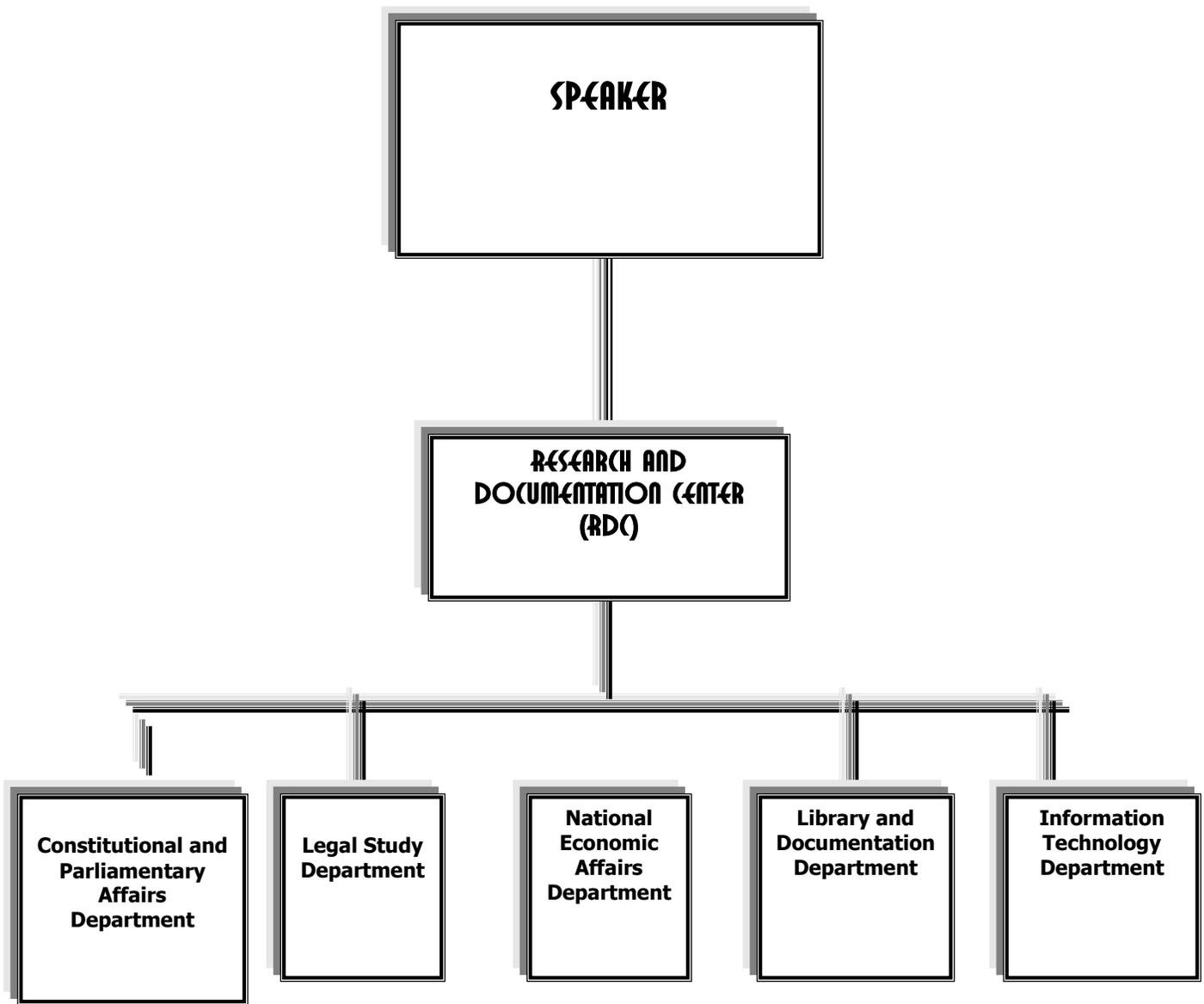
Accordingly the need and importance of independent information was clearly understood and identified by the parliamentary leadership from the beginning of the establishment of the present Parliament. On the basis of this understanding that two research teams (legal research and economic & social research) were organized under the Secretariat of the two Houses to support the House, the Committees, the Speaker and MPs in bill review, policy analysis and budget cycle. Later on it was recognized that the capacity of these two teams in terms of structure, manpower and skill was not up to the standard required to meet the various demands of the Parliament.

The idea of establishing an independent research institute emerged and was debated. Workshops were prepared and intellectuals and academicians were invited for brain storming sessions to choose the best approach of establishing the Institute. The leadership chose the option of establishing an autonomous research center accountable to the Speaker as the best suited to the Ethiopian situation and the need to support the Parliament, Committees, Speakers and the MPs by providing an independent, non-partisan research, information, library and IT service.

3. *Structure of Research and Documentation Center (RDC)*

The Research and Documentation Center of the Ethiopian Parliament (RDC) was established in May 2002 and directly responsible to the Speaker. It was instituted with a view to provide the House and its organs with information and to provide professional consultancy services based on research on matters entrusted to the House particularly on legislation and on the performance of the government executive organ.

To achieve these objectives the Center was organized in 5 departments, 21 teams and divisions.



4. *Broad Duties and Responsibilities of Research and Documentation Center*

The principal roles and duties of RDC are: to conduct research on various fields; make policy analysis; prepare political and social forecast; increase transparency, accountability and effectiveness of government by gathering independent information; organize forums; organize training programmes for the MPs; invite academicians, professionals and policy makers to deliver lectures; organize workshops for MPs; publish studies and assist constructive relations between the Parliament, the Executive and Regional States.

At the moment the major priority areas of the Center for the coming few years are: -

- ◆ To provide the Committees of the House with professional advise and information on matters of bill review, bill drafting, policy analysis, capacity building and monitoring the executive organs of the government;
- ◆ According to requests, to prepare draft bills, to conduct research and studies and to compile information;
- ◆ Provide the office with professional services;
- ◆ Organize the Center with well-trained and energetic staff to carry out its mission;
- ◆ Enable the Parliament and departments of the Center to acquire studies and information services backed by Information Technology(IT) and;
- ◆ Organize the library and documentation services so that the users may efficiently and promptly obtain information sources necessary for research;

5. *Challenges and Opportunities*

At present, the Research Institute is limited in its capacity. It may soon be able to expand its staff and information resources and consequently enhance its ability to support the Committees, Members and Secretariat of the House of Peoples' Representatives. Here are some of the challenges and opportunities;

a. Challenges

- ◆ The Research and Documentation Center of the Ethiopian parliament recruits on the basis of the civil service law of the country. Therefore a researcher who can satisfy the requirement of the civil service requirement in terms of qualification and experience can be employed as a researcher in the Center. There is no any rule which prevents employees with party affiliations from being employed as a researcher in the Center. In principle this may threaten the neutrality or the non-partisanship of the Center -- particularly when considered from the position of parliamentarians of different parties.

- ◆ On the other hand, the researchers are also expected to provide conclusions, which may be interpreted as in support of a particular partisan position.
- ◆ The neutrality of the research is threatened by these two factors -- i.e., there are employees with party affiliations and parliamentarians expect conclusions.
- ◆ Sometimes members of the parliament also consider the research product as partisan, because they only want to judge the research output from their political line.
- ◆ It has been difficult for the Center to recruit staff due to poor pay compared to other opportunities, inadequate training and other incentives and sometimes the political environment of the Parliament. Consequently out of the authorized establishment of 88 people allocated to 21 divisions of the Center, only 5 divisions employ 13 staff in total while the remaining 16 divisions are completely vacant. These situations make it difficult for the Center to carry out its functions and responsibilities to the required standard, volume and time with just the available work force at the moment.
- ◆ In certain occasions the Center can not meet the Committees deadlines due to the shortage of time allotted to carry out the assignment. This happens mainly because Committees did not carefully plan by themselves and/or they do not understand how long it takes to undertake good research.

b. Opportunities

- ◆ The political commitment of the leadership to establish a strong research service in the Parliament is very high. This is an opportunity of the Center to get adequate support and timely decision.
- ◆ The existing staffs, though limited in number, are flexible to take any assignment and are committed to provide accurate timely, non partisan and professional support to the Parliament with adequate information in its oversight and legislative functions.
- ◆ Implementation of the information network within the Parliament will help research staff and the Parliament to have access to information.
- ◆ The recent restructuring of the House and Secretariat will help the Center to have more staff, more autonomy.

6. Conclusion

Parliament is an important institution for development of democracy and good governance. Parliaments have the important task of making laws that govern the country. To this effect, they should be assisted by research and advice.

The Research and Documentation Center at its current capacity cannot provide the necessary facilities at least in the realm of research and advisory services to the Parliament particularly when the future growing need of the Parliament is taken into account. To this end, the strengthening of the Center is vital for the Parliament to meet its public obligations by making informed decision.

The Center has faced many difficulties to meet its obligation of providing information to the Parliament due to lack of qualified researchers and other infrastructure like computer, Internet and organized library facilities. On the other hand we are looking to the better future to upgrade the capacity of the Center in the very new future.

We developed strategic plan for the Center for the year 2003 – 2005 and our future focus will be on the following:

1. Provide improved services (policy advice, information and capacity building) to and build relationships with the Committees so they can review and draft bills, conduct oversight activities and improve the public hearing/consultation process.
2. Conduct Research Projects or Draft Bills as requested by the Speaker or the House
3. Provide professional management advice to support an effective Secretariat – so that it can eventually conduct all the administrative/support work needed by Parliament.
4. Ensure Center has sufficient, well-qualified and well-trained staff to carry out its mission.
5. Ensure effective IT implementation to support effective research and information services for all of the Departments of the Parliament.
6. Ensure fast and effective access to the information resources needed to do research analysis.