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THE SOMALI IN THE NEW POLITICAL ORDER OF ETHIOPIA

by

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With the collapse of the military regime which ruled that country between 1974 and 1991, Ethiopia entered a season of political ferment. The collapse of the military regime signalled the defeat of forces that had dominated Ethiopia throughout this century, and made possible the political self-assertion of subordinate and minority groups. Whether the end result of this process will be a fundamental and historic change in the political life of this country is as yet uncertain. In the meantime, many political organizations have emerged to represent long suppressed population groups, and they are claiming a share of governmental power in a decentralized state structure whose constituent units are ethnically defined. Among them are more than a dozen organizations claiming to represent the Somali people of Ethiopia.

Given their history of alienation and irredentism, Somali participation in the process whose declared goal is to restructure the Ethiopian state on the basis of self-governing ethnic communities came as a surprise. It was welcome by the aspiring architects of the new state who came to power in Addis Ababa in May 1991. The Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), created and controlled by the Tigrai Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), had a blueprint of the new political order ready before it came to power. Theoretically, this is based on the TPLF's own avowed commitment to national self-determination. From a practical political mobilization in Ethiopia, especially opposition mobilization, during the violent reign of the military regime, it could not be ignored. The participation of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), whose claim to represent the largest ethnic group in the country made it a key player, hinged on this point; that is, political recognition and self-government for ethnic groups. The representatives of the United States government, who also took part in the preparation of a new government for Ethiopia, supported a strategy designed to entice most existing and potential political actors to participate. Indeed at the time, an appeal to ethnicity appeared to offer the only hope of forging the political consensus required by the new rulers, if they were to rule Ethiopia peacefully, and the EPRDF embraced it.

The data presented in this paper were gathered during the summer of 1993 in Ethiopia. Most of it came from interviews with persons referred to in these pages. Those who wish to know more about the background of organizations and events mentioned here can consult Markakis, J., National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa, (Cambridge University Press, 1987; Zed Press, 1989)

The victors in the Ethiopian civil war went to considerable lengths to ensure that representatives of the main ethnic groups and

organizations could attend the 'Democratic and Peaceful Transitional Conference' held in Addis Ababa in July 1991, a little more than a month after the EPRDF came to power. Although they felt there was little hope of securing Somali acceptance, nevertheless they asked for Sudanese help to locate representatives of the long moribund Western Somalia Liberation Front (WSLF). The Sudanese found them hiding in the midst of war-torn Mogadisho, fearing Hawiye revenge for their long association with Siad Barre's regime and the mindless violence sweeping the Somali capital. They were flown to Khartoum, where they met with EPRDF representatives.

The leader of this delegation was none other than Abdi Nassir Sheikh Aden, the veteran Ogadeni nationalist leader, who began a long career as one of the founders and director of the subversive Ogaden Company for Trade and Industry in the 1950s, and who had been Siad Barre's choice as Secretary General of the WSLF since 1983. Another member of this group was Ugaz Mohammed Abdi, a veteran of the 1963 uprising in the Ogaden and, at this time, defence chief of the WSLF. In Khartoum, they were shown the draft Charter for the transitional government of Ethiopia, a remarkably liberal document which guaranteed not only the right of nationalities to administer their own affairs, but also their right to independence if they so wished. On this basis, the WSLF veterans accepted the invitation to attend the conference held in Addis Ababa in July 1991.

They represented an organization that had no real presence within Ethiopia after the defeat of the Somali invasion of the Ogaden in 1978. Controlled and manipulated by the Siad Barre regime, the WSLF had become a pawn in the domestic politics of the Somali Republic, and the Ogadeni were enroled in the clan coalition which sustained that regime. Office in the WSLF became a sinecure for compliant veterans, while younger and more militant members left the organization in disillusionment and many of them went abroad. Disillusion turned to outrage when Siad Barre betrayed the cause of the Ogaden in a quid pro quo with Mengistu Haile Mariam, the Ethiopian dictator. When the two beleaguered tyrants met in January 1986 under the auspices of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Drought and Development in Djibouti, they negotiated a deal that was sealed with a Peace Accord between the two countries signed in April 1988. Siad Barre sold out the Ogaden in exchange for the expulsion of the Somali National Movement from Ethiopia. The fact that the WSLF was not even able to register a protest destroyed what little credibility it had left.

Mogadisho's unsubtle exploitation of Somali irredentism in Ethiopia and heavy handed control of the WSLF had always been resented by many Ogadeni militants, but their attempts to resist it had never succeeded thanks to the efficiency of Siad Barre's security services. Many attempts were made to form what was called a 'front within the front,' but none succeeded. It was not until the final betrayal by Siad Barre that defectors from the WSLF were able to form an autonomous organization abroad.

The ONLF is said to have been formed in the Gulf in August 1984, but a public announcement of its existence was not made until March 1986, in Kuwait. Its founders were members of the WSLF, and some of them were its representatives in the states of the Gulf. Sheikh Ibrahim Abdulah, the chairman, was WSLF representative in Abu Dhabi. Abdulahi Mohammed Sadi, its most prominent member, was WSLF representative in Kuwait. In February 1987, Abdulahi distributed ONLF documents at the Islamic Conference in Kuwait, and the Arab press took notice of its existence. Soon afterwards, he was expelled from Kuwait and found refuge in Norway.

The initial ONLF policy statement defined the Ogaden as 'an oppressed nation colonized by Ethiopia,' and pledged to establish 'an independent Ogaden state with full sovereignty in line with the aspirations of its people.' This was a departure from the irredentist aspirations of the WSLF, and for the next few years the ONLF struggled to get out of the shadow of the older movement and establish a distinct identity. The gradual unravelling of the Somali state into warring clan fiefdoms created a conducive climate for a reassessment of the merits of Somali irredentism and the assertion of Ogadeni political autonomy. However, the claims sometimes made by ONLF supporters of the sudden birth of an Ogadeni nation and its aspirations for independence seemed a bit premature, to say the least. The ONLF had yet to make its presence felt, when the military regime collapsed in Ethiopia, and was not invited to attend the conference in Addis Ababa in July 1991. It seemed also that the ONLF had yet to make up its mind about the unfolding situation in Ethiopia. Ibrahim Abdulah, its chairman, a teacher educated in Arabia, was against involvement with the new regime in Addis Ababa. In a public meeting in Amsterdam held at the time of the Addis Ababa conference, and attended by the author, the ONLF members present openly disagreed among themselves about the position of their organization and its relationship with the WSLF.

The Democratic and Peaceful Transitional Conference of Ethiopia was held in Addis Ababa during 1-5 July 1991. It was attended by representatives of twenty four 'nationality movements'. A few of these had existed prior to this time; such as the WSLF, which was allotted two seats. Most of the others were formed in Addis Ababa on the eve of the conference, at the behest of the EPRDF. Among the latter was an 'Issa and Gadabursi Peoples Movement' which was allotted one seat. Representatives of a few multi-ethnic political groups were included to make a total of 87 participants. The EPRDF has 32 seats and, with the support of the OLF which had 12 seats, was in full control of the proceedings. The main task of the conference was to approve the Charter for the provisional government of Ethiopia prepared by the EPRDF in collaboration with the OLF. In the preceding month, the EPRDF had managed to present its objectives to the leaders of the main groups, and while most thought them too good to be true, they were willing to give the new regime time to prove itself. Indeed, they had no other choice. In the conference, only one vote was cast against the resolution that accepted the referendum in Eritrea, and four abstentions were registered on the final vote on the Charter.

The Charter provided for the establishment of a Council of Representatives, which was more or less a replica of the conference, although provision was made for the inclusion of a few more ethnic groups. Each ethnic group was allotted a number of seats, and these were divided among the organizations claiming to represent it. The only condition was that they accept the Charter, and that their representatives had not been members of the defunct Party of the Working Peoples of Ethiopia set up by the previous regime, or its security apparatus. Although they bargained for more, the Somali were allotted four seats, of which the WSLF took three. The fourth went to the ONLF, whose leadership had gathered belatedly in Addis Ababa.

Both organizations share the same Ogadeni clan base, and their adherence to the Charter signifies an identity of political objectives. Understandably, they came under pressure to unite, and pronouncements to that effect were made on several occasions in the months that followed. They opened a joint office in Addis Ababa after the conference, and resolved to call an 'Ogadeni national congress.' Later on, Abdi Nassir announced the two had a 'unified leadership' and were working as one. (Ethiopian Herald 28/3/1992) In reality, they were competing for political support among the Ogadeni, although only the ONLF appears to have made much of an effort.

The first ONLF congress was held in the Ogaden in February 1992. It chose a leadership in the form of a central and an executive committee, and Sheikh Ibrahim Abdulah as its chairman. Being essentially an exile organization, the ONLF was conscious of the need to cultivate support in the region, and exerted some effort in that direction. By contrast, while it has roots and a clear image in the Ogaden, the WSLF remains organizationally moribund. Abdi Nassir Sheikh Aden toured the region to rally support, but had little help. For example, Ugaz Mohammed Abdi, WSLF spokesman in Addis Ababa and one of its representatives in the Council of Representatives, made not a single visit to the Ogaden, a region he had not set foot in since 1964.

Having adopted ethnicity as the guiding principle in the design of the new state, the new Ethiopian regime faced the task of delineating ethnic regions to serve as its constituent units. Given the fact that more than eighty distinct ethnic groups have been identified in Ethiopia, this was risking opening Pandora's box. However, the committee set up to demarcate the regions had its task made comparatively easy by work done under the previous regime, which had founded an Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities to prepare a regional self-administration scheme that never materialized. The committee's report was discussed in the Council of Representatives in November 1991. It was adopted with some revisions, and a provisional map appeared.

Using mainly linguistic criteria, the map divided Ethiopia into twelve ethnic regions plus two regions for the multi-ethnic cities

of Addis Ababa and Harar. Nine of the regions contain each a number of ethnic groups, and they are divided into zones and districts designed roughly to fit ethnic criteria. Only three regions are ethnically homogeneous; region 5, the Somali region, being one of these. This region includes not only the Ogaden, but the area in the north bordering Djibouti, as well as southern Bale and a part of southern Sidamo. The last two regions had been the domain of the Somali and Abo Liberation Front (SALF), which had a mixed constituency of Oromo and Somali and a blurred identity, and operated in tandem with the WSLF in the 1970s.

Like the WSLF, SALF in the 1990s was a phantom organization with no presence in Ethiopia, but it was not forgotten by the EPRDF. It asked the Sudanese to bring Wako Gutu, the legendary Oromo rebel leader, and some of his companions from Mogadisho to Addis Ababa in time for the July conference. After being briefed by EPRDF representatives in Khartoum, the veterans who had fought against Ethiopian rule for nearly three decades were forced to consider the political implications of ethnicity, something they were never troubled with before. With ethnicity now the cardinal principle of political organization, a mongrel like SALF had no place in the new scheme. Consequently, they were forced to part with their Somali comrades and to chose a name with a clear ethnic image. The Oromo fell out over this detail. Some opted for the name Oromo Abo, while Wako and others chose United Oromo. They went to the conference and later to the Council of Representatives separately with these names.

The regional delineation was a fair dispensation, and the Somali had nothing to complain about. Indeed, Ugaz Mohammed Abdi, one of the WSLF members in the Council of Representatives declared it 'a victory for Somalis.'(Ethiopian Herald 29/1/92) Region 5, the Somali region, shares an extensive border with region 4, the Oromo region, which is the largest of all. Overlapping claims were inevitable, and when it came to the elections, which were based on this scheme, confusion and conflict were unavoidable. The map itself was withdrawn to contain the conflict. However for the time being, the lid was kept on Pandora's box.

To put the self-government scheme into operation, elections were held at the local and regional levels in April and June 1992 respectively. Intense political activity, an unprecedented experience in Ethiopia, preceded the elections. Political parties, nearly all claiming an ethnic identity, proliferated. The lead was given by the EPRDF, which had no intention of losing control of the political process it had initiated. It quickly promoted the formation of affiliated organizations in most regions of Ethiopia; invariably named 'peoples democratic organizations' (PDOs) The prototype is the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO), founded even before the EPRDF came to power.

In many areas the PDOs competed with factions claiming to be the genuine representatives of their ethnic group. A plethora of organizations emerged to represent ethnic minorities that found

themselves encapsulated in regions dominated by large ethnic groups. Only a few groups were formed to oppose ethnicity as a political principle and to defend Ethiopian unity. It should be noted that nearly all these political factions are little more than coteries of urban petty bourgeois elements and intellectuals, mostly resident in Addis Ababa. The number of schoolteachers involved in them is impressive. Actively assisted by the resources of the state, including the EPRDF guerrilla army, the PDOs harassed and intimidated the opposition, creating an atmosphere of crisis, and finally provoking the withdrawal of many opposition organizations from the elections, the suspension of elections in several areas, and the earning the censure of international observers. Not surprisingly, the EPRDF and its affiliates swept the elections throughout the country, except in the Somali region.

Probably because it was deemed a hopeless venture, Region 5 was the only one where no attempt was made to set up a PDO affiliate, and the Somali were left to their own political devices. They reacted characteristically by forming more than a dozen clan and lineage based groups to resist domination by the Ogadeni clan. Thirteen had registered with the Electoral Commission by mid-1992, and some more appeared later. They included the Issa and Gurgura Liberation Front, the Horiyal Democratic Front, the Ethiopian Somali Democratic Movement which claims to represent the Ishaq living in the Haud, the Democratic United Party which claims to represent the Hawiye of the southern Ogaden, the Democratic Action League formed by Issa, a group representing the Rer Barre cultivators in Kelafo, and another representing the Shekash clan which is dispersed throughout the Ogaden.

Two other groups sought to rally support across clan and lineage lines on the basis of Islam, as their names signify. An Islamic Solidarity party formed around a well-known and respected cleric, and pursued a moderate course for Somali unity in line with political tradition. It accepted the Charter, and maintained amicable relations with other Somali political factions. The Islamic Unity party belongs to the modern militant fundamentalist creed, preaches world Muslim unity, and is linked to similar organizations in the region. Led by relatively unknown persons, most of who are thought to have been educated in the Arab region, it clashed violently with other Somali political factions in the period leading to the elections, and ultimately refused to participate.

There was no lack of incidents in the Somali region during this period, and not a few lives were lost, including that of an UNHCR employee who was killed in Gode. Drought and threatening famine made the situation worse. Tension reigned in many districts on the border between regions 4 (Oromo) and 5 (Somali). At least eleven districts with mixed ethnic population became bones of contention. Tension reached a peak during voter registration, when people were asked to declare their ethnic identity, and each side tried to reinforce its claim on the basis of numbers. No election was held in three districts because of ethnic clashes, while the results in

another eight were disputed. The city of Dire Dawa is claimed by the Somali as the capital of their region, but this claim is strongly opposed by the Oromo, and both sides were asked by the central government to desist until after the national elections scheduled to be held in 1994.

A major breakdown was averted, and the elections in region 5 were probably the fairest in Ethiopia. Certainly, they produced the most diversified results. Out of 48 districts claimed by region 5, elections were completed in 37, each district sending three representatives to the regional assembly. Out of the total of 111 seats, the ONLF won 69, the WSLF 9, the Democratic Unity Party (Hawiye) 9, the Ethiopian Somali Democratic Movement (Ishaq) 7, the Islamic Solidarity 7, the Democratic Action League (Issa) 6, the Horiyal 3, and the Rer Barre 1.

The regional council met initially in Dire Dawa, where it was addressed by the Prime Minister Tamrat Layne, who said the event proved that 'Ethiopian Somalis are Ethiopian citizens of Somali stock.'(Ethiopian Herald 26/1/93) He also advised them not to press their claim to Dire Dawa at that time, and the assembly chose Gode as the temporary regional capital. The choice of this remote and isolated location, in preference to Jijiga for instance, was dictated by the fact that it lies deep in Ogadeni country. The assembly also chose a flag and a symbol for the region, but not a name, because the preference of the majority for the name Ogadenia is not accepted by the other clans.

The assembly elected a regional executive committee of 19 members. Twelve of these, including the chairman and vice chairman came from the ONLF. Abdulahi Mohammed Sadi was elected chairman, that is, chief executive of the region. Forty five years old, he is a graduate of the Somali National University and has pursued further studies abroad where he spend many years representing the WSLF. Seven seats went to other parties, except for the Rer Barre and Horiyal. The members of the executive committee are divided into a number of committees in charge of regional affairs. According to the transitional scheme, only foreign affairs, defence, and external economic cooperation are excluded from the mandate of the regional government.

Decentralized schemes tend to complexity and duplication. Region 5 is divided into 48 districts, which are the administrative units (woreda) of the former provincial administration. Each of these elects its own executive committee of nine persons, three of who comprise the chairman, vice-chairman and secretary of the district, while the other six are divided into two committees in charge of social services and development respectively. A number of districts are grouped together to form zones, of which region 5 has nine. Zonal administrative committees comprise members of the regional council elected in the districts within each zone.

In order to enable the regions to fulfil their responsibilities, the central government proposed to transfer all assets, personnel,

records, etc., from the central ministries and other state agencies to the regional governments. The chairman of region 5 and other members of the regional executive spent the early part of 1993 in Addis Ababa, searching for these assets and negotiating their transfer to the region. They were grimly amused to discover that most of the assets and much of the personnel assigned to the provincial administration of the Ogaden by former Ethiopian regimes could not be traced.

Finding trained personnel promised to be a major problem. Although little was said officially on the subject, it was assumed that regional administration employees ought at least to be familiar with the local language. Potentially, this could evolve into an ethnic barrier in regional administration employment. At any rate, there couldn't be many trained non-Somali Ethiopians who would consider working in Gode. Nevertheless, by mid-1993 the regional administration had managed to put together a skeleton professional staff of about one hundred Somali. The police commissioner is a former military chief of the ONLF. He is responsible for establishing an all-Somali police force under the sole authority of the regional government. The head of education is a former dean of the Somali National University. The choice of language having been left to the regions, region 5 decided to use the Somali language and Latin alphabet at the primary level and English at the secondary. So far, no provision has been made for teaching Amharic, still the language of government in Ethiopia. One woman has been included in the regional executive committee. Asked what responsibility has been assigned to her, the regional chairman replied with a straight face, 'industry.'

The Somali regional government faces a formidable task in any field of development it chooses to embark. Even by Ethiopian standards, the region it rules is isolated and impoverished. Gode, the capital, is not even connected by telephone with the rest of the country, nor by any modern transport links. The only potential resource available are the natural gas fields discovered in Kalubo and Hilala south of Gode. Developed with Soviet Union assistance under the military regime, they are now part of a World Bank project that awaits the approval of the central government. The previous regime also built a 3,000 hectares cotton farm in Gode, and a dam for irrigation and hydroelectric power on the Shebeli river. Finally, there is a modern military air base at Gode built by the United States under the Haile Selassie regime to bring Somalia within reach of the Ethiopian air force.

The pastoralist economy of the region has been undermined by two decades of intermittent war, repeated and massive population displacement, the interruption of trade with and through Somalia, the influx of refugees from that country, and frequent drought. Famine was a constant threat during the past two years. No taxes were collected by the state during this period anywhere in Ethiopia, and the budget of regional governments was met by central government subsidy. From now on, however, the regions are expected to raise their own revenue through taxation, and this will present

the government of region 5 with a delicate problem, given the weak economic situation of the pastoralists and their strong aversion to taxation.

Prospects

There is an air of unreality about events in Ethiopia these days. The dawn of a brave new political world in this godforsaken corner of Africa is something most people find difficult to take seriously. A number of questions hang over the experiment that is being tried. The first concerns Pandora's familiar box. Despite the fact that it is an essential factor in political practice throughout Africa, and it could hardly be otherwise, ethnicity has never been considered a suitable principle in statecraft design because of its alleged divisive nature. The new regime in Ethiopia argues that what has proved divisive is, in fact, the attempt to deny ethnicity the political recognition it merits.

Given the proven impossibility of determining its essence, the first question - insistently raised nowadays by a new generation of social anthropologists, whose predecessors invented the concept - is whether the ethnic group in truth is a figment of the anthropological imagination rather than a social fact. In Ethiopia the problem of definition has been facilely sidestepped by making language the criterion of ethnic identity. This raises a second question, which is whether 'ethnic' groups thus defined have the demographic coherence, social integrity, shared material base, and the political solidarity required to make them suitable building blocks of a larger political structure. If not, then intra-ethnic, rather than inter-ethnic, conflict is likely to be the order of the day.

Indeed, signs of this have already appeared in Ethiopia, and not only in the predictable political fragmentation of the Somali along clan lines. Similar splintering along regional, clan, and lineage lines, as well as religion and dialect has effected other ethnic groups, and it seems likely to acquire momentum as communities mobilize to fight for resources that are coming under regional control. Self-government is meaningless unless it produces tangible material results, and thereby hangs a third question, which is how can the poorest and least developed country in the world support what is probably the most complex, delicate and expensive system of government.

These questions do not touch upon the intentions of the regime. However, there are many in Ethiopia who doubt its sincerity, and for them such questions are academic. According to one school of thought, to which most aspiring politicians frustrated by the manoeuvres of the PDOs belong, maintains that the new scheme is but

the latest ploy used by the Abyssinians of the north to retain control of the imperial state, albeit this time under Tigrayan hegemony. Where the imperial regime invoked God, and the military trusted to Marx, the Tigrayans resort to tribalism in order to divide and rule. This is the line taken by the Oromo Liberation Front, for instance.

The existence and breadth of the opposition raises a final question, which is whether the new regime can retain control of the country for long, whatever its intentions might be. For example, while it managed to outmanoeuvre and reduce the OLF to political impotence for the time being, it is far from certain that it can win lasting political support from the vast Oromo population through the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization. The same applies to many other ethnic groups. If it fails to do so, then it will have to resort to force to retain power, and the experiment will be over.

The Somali politicians in Ethiopia are sensitive to the manifold ambiguities of the situation, but they don't display any ambivalence towards regional self-administration. They appear determined to gain as much as possible from the scheme, and profess to be hopeful for the future. Only the Islamic Unity faction came out against it. Asked how he can reconcile a life long struggle against Ethiopia with his present position in the Council of Representatives, Ugaz Mohammed Abdi replied with his own question: to wit, 'isn't this what we fought for all along?' Understandably, pan-Somali unity is not a subject fit for discussion anywhere these days. Moreover, if the relative strength of the ONLF means anything, it could be that irredentism is losing favour among the Somali in Ethiopia. That could not be simply because the idea at present seems farcical, but also because it had long become clear that the struggle of the Somali in Ethiopia for political freedom was futile as long as it was perceived as a territorial dispute between Ethiopia and Somalia.
This was an argument used by the ONLF to good effect.

Provided the experiment succeeds, does it hold promise of a lasting accommodation for the Somali in Ethiopia? To repeat a question once posed by D. Laitin: 'Must these Ogaadeenis who consider themselves to be Somalis always do so? Could they ever consider themselves to be Ethiopians?' I would not venture to answer this question, but Laitin thought 'if Somali politics become increasingly fissiparous, such an outcome would not be unlikely.'*

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* 'The Ogaadeen Question and Changes in Somali Politics,' in Rothchild, D. & A. Olorunsola (eds) State Versus Ethnic Claims: African Policy Dilemmas (Westview Press, 1983)