

State and Politics in Ethiopia's Somali Region since 1991

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I. Ethiopian-Somalis: From Subjects to Citizens?¹

When asked by an interviewer whether he felt more Somali or more Ethiopian, Sultan Korfa Garane Ahmed, a federal member of parliament representing part of Ethiopia's Somali Region, diplomatically responded: "I am an Ethiopian-Somali."² The MP's self-description as an Ethiopian-Somali highlights two crucial implications for the analysis of contemporary politics in what was formerly known as the Ogaden and is today referred to as the Somali Regional State or simply Region 5. For the first time in the history of the Ethiopian empire-state or, more precisely, since the forced incorporation of the Somali inhabited Ogaden into Ethiopia at the end of the 19th century, the Somalis are officially recognized as one of the country's "nations, nationalities and peoples." Since the accession to power of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in May 1991, attempts to forge a distinct "Ethiopian-Somali" or "Somali-Ethiopian" identity have superseded the former regimes' patronizing attitudes toward the country's "subject nationalities."³

Throughout history Abyssinia and Somalia were perceived as two diametrically opposed collectives, identities, and principles.⁴ In stereotypical yet politically instrumental terms, Ethiopians and Somalis identified themselves as opposites in linguistic (Semitic vs. Cushitic), religious (Christian vs. Muslim), economic (settled cultivators vs. transhumant pastoralists), and political (hierarchical feudalism vs. egalitarian segmentary kinship) respects. From Ahmed Ibrahim

al-Ghazi's (Gran or Gurey) 16th century *jihād* against highland Ethiopia to Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan's Dervish fighters at the end of the 19th century and from the Somali-Ethiopian Ogaden war (1977–78) to the recent presence of Ethiopian troops in Somalia's Gedo, Bay, and Bakool regions, Ethiopians and Somalis generally viewed one another as members of mutually exclusive social universes. This holds particularly true for those Somali clan lineages that inhabit and migrate within the 250,000 km² territory of Region 5. The invention of an Ethiopian-Somali identity thus bears symbolic significance, as it had hitherto been regarded as something out of the question. In addition, to the critically minded observer, Sultan Korfa's statement raises a second problem: despite their newly found status as Ethiopian citizens, the political destiny and identity of the Somalis inhabiting Ethiopia's southeastern lowlands remain heavily contested.

For the researcher this entails the difficulty of circumventing the antagonistic and politicized narratives that dominate the discourse about and explanations of the Somali Region.⁵ As we shall see, the idea of an Ethiopian-Somali identity represents only one (and a heavily disputed) position in a broad spectrum of identifications. If Ethiopian-Somali identity remains disputed, the lenses through which this problem has been apprehended have themselves evolved over time.⁶ Between Somalia's independence in 1960 and state collapse in 1991, the "Ogaden problem" was mainly perceived as a colonial legacy clashing with the pan-Somali agenda of reunifying all Somali inhabited territories.⁷ The Somali government spoke of Ethiopian occupation and colonization (Somali Democratic Republic 1974), while Ethiopians contested the idea of a "Greater Somalia" and the validity of its neighbor's nationalist claims.⁸ In international political forums the Ogaden was framed and addressed by Ethiopianists as an international border dispute between sovereign nation-states.⁹ With the demise of the Somali state and the internal rearrangement of the Ethiopian state in 1991, politics in the Ogaden took a new twist. Somalia unwillingly lost its irredentist claim, while the new Ethiopian regime extended an invitation to Ethiopian-Somali leaders to participate in the organization of a new ethnically based regional state.

Although fifteen years have passed since the end of the military-socialist Derg regime led by Mengistu Haile Mariam, our review of the political and institutional dynamics in the Somali Region demonstrates that the issue of Ethiopian-Somali self-determination, within or outside the Ethiopian framework, is far from settled. As we shall

argue, for political, economic, and genealogical reasons, Ethiopian-Somalis are torn between integration into Ethiopia, independence on the basis of the right to self-determination, and the irredentist claims of the now defunct Somali Democratic Republic to Somali-inhabited territories beyond its borders. This article argues that the recognition of an Ethiopian-Somali polity has neither translated into democratic or effective working relations between the federal government and its Somali regional state nor, for that matter, increased mutual appreciation between highland Ethiopians and Somalis. In the first section of the essay, we review important developments in the formal political arena of the region since 1991, with a special focus on party politics. A second section looks at how the new principle of “ethnic federalism” was implemented and how it affected Ethiopian-Somalis in Ethiopia’s Somali region. The third part outlines the federal government’s interventions and evolving agenda towards its Somali periphery. Fourthly, we discuss the contested political identities of Ethiopian-Somalis alluded to in the introduction. Finally, this article concludes with a discussion of the historic continuities and ruptures of the relations between highland Ethiopia and its Somali subjects-cum-citizens.

II. 1991: A New Beginning

Ever since the 1977–78 Ethiopian-Somali war, the Somali region has remained a theatre of political turmoil. Following the war, an estimated 800,000 Ethiopian Somalis crossed the border to neighboring Somalia, where they lived in refugee camps for the next decade and a half.¹⁰ But the victory of Ethiopia over its Somali and Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) adversaries did not lead to an effective pacification of the area. The international media departed with the official end of the inter-state war, affording the Derg regime a free hand in meting out a brutal dose of civilian abuses. Counterinsurgency campaigns against remnants of Somali and Oromo guerrilla groups culminated in the forcible relocation of local inhabitants into restricted villages, indiscriminate aerial bombardment, and “fragmented wars” between armed proxy groups.¹¹ During the early 1980s, the Ogaden was rendered a vast military zone. Ethiopian-Somalis often allude to the Derg’s rule over the Ogaden and the associated absence of social development as corresponding to “30 military camps and one high school.”¹² A short-lived façade of stability at the beginning of the 1980s was rudely disturbed by the 1983–84 famine. Deprived of traditional

livelihood mechanisms of cross-border movement, trading, and cultivation, the Ogaden population plunged into a famine situation long before the whole country in 1984.¹³ In the meantime, the fortunes of the WSLF started waning when President Siyaad Barre, in a bid to save his failing regime, signed a peace agreement with Mengistu Haile Mariam in Djibouti in April 1988.

By the time the EPRDF took charge in Addis Ababa in May 1991, the Somali Region was once again in a state of political confusion. State collapse, famine, and civil strife in neighboring Somalia had led to a massive influx of Somalis who sought refuge in the Ogaden region. By mid-1992 an estimated 594,000 refugees and 117,000 returnees found their way to the northern part of the region.¹⁴ The Derg had not left a workable institutional framework that was capable of guiding the region out of the mounting political and humanitarian crisis.¹⁵ It was against that backdrop that the EPRDF had a hard time identifying the right people and organizations to invite to the July 1991 Addis Ababa transitional conference. In the absence of a bona fide Ethiopian-Somali representative organization, the EPRDF allocated three seats to WSLF and one seat to the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). Despite Meles Zenawi's prolonged stay in Mogadishu in the 1980s, he did not give the Somalis much say in deciding who should represent them at the transitional conference. The little influence they enjoyed in shaping the future of nascent federal Ethiopia was also illustrative of their internal divisions.¹⁶ This said, the Somali Region for the first time experienced a period of political pluralism during the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) as a multitude of clan-based political parties came to the scene, beginning to jockey for power and influence. In the first half of the 1990s, more than a dozen parties established their headquarters in Jigjiga, leading to a situation that an observer jokingly remembered as follows: "There were so many party flags in town, you could have thought it was the United Nations."¹⁷

The first regional government was formed by the ONLF, which won over 60% of the parliamentary seats in the June 1992 elections.¹⁸ Technically speaking, the reign of the ONLF, headed by Abdullahi Mohamed Saadi, lasted barely a year. The next two presidents belonged to the WSLF or were independent candidates associated with the ONLF on grounds of a shared genealogical background. The ONLF regime, reflective of the failure, crisis, and contradictions of the WSLF leadership and agenda in the 1980s, was characterized by uncertainty, disorganization, and a haphazard groping for direction. Most of the

first cabinet's time was spent in Addis Ababa on the pretext of getting acquainted with the TFG and attempting to secure the region's budget.¹⁹ Like the exiled WSLF officials, these returnee politicians had hardly any knowledge of the issues that mattered to the local people. From the start, the mismanagement of public resources, a narrow focus on pursuing sectarian interests, and a general lack of responsiveness toward the population were characteristic traits of governance in the Somali Region. Yet it was not these shortcomings but the request for exercising the right to self-determination (i.e., secession from Ethiopia) by the Ogaadeen-dominated regional assembly in February 1994 that provoked the harsh intervention by the federal government.²⁰

The year 1994 marked a turning point for the Somali Region both in terms of its internal power balance and its relations with the federal government in Addis Ababa. With the forced removal of the ONLF administration, led by President Hassan Gire Qalinle, the honeymoon between EPRDF and nationalist Ogaadeen Ethiopian-Somalis came to an acrimonious end. The formation of the Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL) by ten non-Ogaadeen political parties in early 1994 corresponded to the delayed establishment of an EPRDF affiliate party in the Somali Region.²¹ Behind the scenes and in anticipation of ONLF's secessionist agenda, the EPRDF had since 1992 devised a strategy for containing the ONLF.²² The circumstances of ESDL's creation were symbolic since the party was inaugurated in the Hurso federal military camp (near Dire Dawa) in the presence of then-Prime Minister Tamrat Layne.²³ However, while the ESDL benefited from federal support and capacity building in administrative respects, its creation was a direct response to what the non-Ogaadeen political parties perceived as ONLF hegemony. While ONLF took the right to secession enshrined in the Transitional Charter (FDRE Constitution Article 39) at face value, the ESDL "maybe more than others, understood the limits of democracy proposed by the regime."²⁴ The ESDL won a landslide victory in the 1995 elections by securing 76 (out of 139) seats in the regional House of Peoples' Representatives and 15 (out of 23 accorded to the Somali Region) in the federal one.²⁵ Splits within the ONLF, an election boycott by the ONLF's "hawks," and the swift rearrangement of electoral constituencies to the disadvantage of the Ogaadeen clan aided the ESDL's electoral victory.

From the Ethiopian perspective, EPRDF's alliance with the ESDL marked the appearance of a number of moderate and secular Ethiopian-Somali politicians in the region's political scene. Among them

was the late Abdulmejid Hussein, chairman of the ESDL and its successor, the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP), as well as a minister and a senior U.N. and Ethiopian diplomat. The influential "ambassador," as he was commonly referred to, was trusted by leading cadres of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Other senior pro-EPRDF Ethiopian-Somali politicians who gained prominence during the past decade are Shemsudin Ahmed, Abdulrashid Dulane, Dr. Mohamed Sarhaye and Mahmoud Dirir. All of them were at one time ministers or ambassadors for the federal government and executives in the central committee of the Somali Region's ruling party. As political brokers loyal to the EPRDF they represented federal interests at the regional level and regional demands at the federal level, thereby constituting a vital political link between the federal and regional capitals, Addis Ababa and Jigjiga. Through their endorsement of EPRDF's political agenda they obtained federal backing in the region's internal power struggles. Conversely, ever since the arrival to power of the ESDL in 1994, the Somali Region's senior politicians have been mostly perceived as "a surrogate of the Addis Ababa federal government."²⁶ In reality, dependence on federal support also meant that the center could remove regional cabinets and presidents loyal to the EPRDF whenever they "digressed from EPRDF's agenda."²⁷ Consequently, dismissals of senior politicians and administrators became a recurrent practice within the Somali Region. Since 1991, nine successive presidents have headed the regional government.²⁸

The ESDL's fortunes as the ruling party did not last for long. A rift between Somali Region President Eid Dahir Farah and various members of the party's executive committee considerably weakened the League and eventually led to Eid's dismissal and imprisonment. By the end of 1997, the ESDL had discredited itself in the eyes of the Ethiopian-Somali public and had lost the support of federal representatives.²⁹ The party's disorder allowed federal authorities to decree a merger between the legal ONLF and the remnants of the ESDL. In June 1998, the ESDL and legal ONLF elected 35 members to represent them at the founding convention of the new Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP). The replacement of the ESDL by the SPDP signified a broadening of the pro-EPRDF alliance within the Somali Region through the inclusion of moderate Ogaadeen politicians. Even so, the SPDP has been "wracked by infighting and political disputes."³⁰ Commentators have described the SPDP as incompetent and "corrupt beyond description."³¹ By 2004, the party's lack of popular support was

widely apparent. Many in the region considered the SPDP a creation of the EPRDF and its leaders handpicked by the latter.³² In reality, Region 5's ruling party represents a loose pro-EPRDF umbrella under which intense political and genealogical competition is played out.

Through its government-aided machinery, the SPDP successfully mobilized voters in the 2000 and 2005 national and 2004 district elections. The 2004 district elections revealed a *de facto* one-party state in the Somali Region under the banner of the SPDP. This was in stark contrast to the region's first multi-party elections to the regional assembly of 1992, which were seen as an example of political pluralism.³³ Out of a total of 3,309 district councillors elected across the region, 3,182 belonged to the SPDP, 21 to the opposition Western Somali Democratic Party (WSDP), and 106 were independent candidates.³⁴ In the disputed 2005 national and regional elections, the SPDP won 161 mandates in the regional parliament (out of 183) and all the region's seats in the federal House of Representatives.³⁵ Part of the SPDP's electoral success and political predominance is due to the effective instrumentalization of state administration and resources for political purposes. Additionally, the party benefited from the establishment of a system of government-appointed and paid elders at regional, zonal, and district levels. These *lataliye* or *amakari* elders ("advisor" in Somali and Amharic, respectively) were appointed throughout the Somali Region on the initiative of the federal government at the beginning of 2000. They function as a parallel organizational framework to the formal government structure, from the district up to the regional levels.³⁶ Apart from assisting local government in matters of peace and security, they have been instrumental in campaigning and mobilizing voters during election periods.³⁷ The integration of elders and community leaders into government was primarily motivated by the Ethiopian state's need to extend government control into rural pastoral areas. Government officials rightly conceived of elders as bearers of intimate knowledge of the clan lineages they represent and of being capable of mobilizing their communities.³⁸ *Lataliye* elders thus act as quasi-governmental administrators who disseminate official policy among the population and inform bureaucrats about the latest developments within their communities.

III. Ethnic Federalism in the Somali Frontier

In the Somali Region the project of state expansion is still at a comparatively embryonic stage. Statistical data on the region's population and livestock are highly unreliable, no geographic map exists that indicates the actual boundaries of administrative units such as zones and districts of the region, and bureaucratic monopolization of public affairs is very limited.³⁹ Ethiopian-Somalis often point out that "the government does nothing at all for us"⁴⁰ and that effective administration is confined to a few urban centers like Jigjiga or Godey. State institutions are unable to hold a monopoly on violence, raise taxes, or provide basic public services. They thereby enjoy little legitimacy in the eyes of rural pastoralists. From a historic perspective, the Ogaden is one of Ethiopia's frontiers where state penetration has always been much weaker than in the central highlands.⁴¹ During the first half of the 1990s, the incumbent regime had recognized the need to set up an effective administration at the district level as a means to expand state control and counter insecurity in Region 5.⁴² But despite grandstanding rhetoric, the devolution of state power and finances to the region's fifty-three districts has been mainly theoretical. This said, the EPRDF's policy of "ethnic federalism"⁴³ has partly altered politics within the region.

The granting of self-rule to Ethiopian-Somalis within Ethiopia's federal architecture decisively transformed local politics. While outsiders have tended to interpret the internal dynamics of Region 5 exclusively in terms of "tribalism," and "clannishness" as "the categorical imperative of Somali political practice,"⁴⁴ regional politics go beyond identity politics. Rather, three parallel phenomena have characterized the Ethiopian-Somali polity in the past one-and-a-half decades.⁴⁵ First, political authority in the Somali Region is predominantly neo-patrimonial. It involves federal and regional patrons who are close to the EPRDF and its SPDP surrogate leaders as well as clients who seek protection and support from their patrons.⁴⁶ This neo-patrimonial rule is animated by the coexistence of a politicized, segmented patrilineal kinship structure on the one hand and a legal-rational local government and bureaucracy on the other. As a result, rotations, dismissals, and changes within regional, zonal, and district executive branches have been common ever since 1991.

Second, the hand over of the region's administration to Ethiopian-Somalis resulted in an acute competition for control over state

resources. Political leaders, namely, the urban-based elite, usually with the support of their respective lineage groups, fought over administrative appointments. They did so primarily to access public budgets. Benefits to be gained included salaries, public contracts, control over security forces, and *per diems* for various *ad hoc* tasks.

Third, like the rest of the country, major political decisions within the Somali Region are made and implemented through the ruling party structure rather than by representative institutions such as parliament or local government councils. Although an “actual overlap in personnel and functions”⁴⁷ between political party, administration, and parliament exists, occupying an important position in the party hierarchy provides more decision-making power than the holding of office.

From the establishment of the region until its first-ever district elections in February 2004, zonal and district administrators and village chairmen were appointed through a top-down process. Senior politicians at the regional level nominated their clients—usually persons loyal to the ruling party and representing the dominant clan lineage within a given territory—as local government officials. In the 2004 local elections each district elected a council including a spokesman, vice-spokesman, administrator, and vice-administrator. These councils are charged with managing budgets and development activities within their respective constituencies. Despite the intention of creating representative institutions at district and regional levels, elections and appointments in Region 5 follow the careful pre-selection of candidates by party leaders. It is only after party endorsement that candidates will mobilize popular support from members of their locality and clan lineage.⁴⁸ While the ruling party (now SPDP, previously ESDL and ONLF) ensures political and ideological conformity from its headquarters in Jigjiga to the remote countryside, elders defend the interests of their lineage by lobbying for recruitment of their kin. As a result, nominations, elections, dismissals, and substitutions of local administrators in the Somali Region occur at the interface of party and genealogical interests. Senior government posts at the regional level (notably the heads of line bureaus) are all occupied by followers of the ruling party. Although the holders of these posts frequently rotate, a certain clan balance reflecting the approximate demographic size of the region’s clan groupings is respected in the apportionment of these treasured positions.

Since 1991, ethnically defined administration in Region 5 has mostly been understood as exclusive rule by a dominant group. Political

representation was equated with a clan lineage's unchallenged control over its home territory. While clan "home" areas exist in Somali society, their borders are neither static nor definite, because pastoral production relies on mobility and flexible resource use arrangements, which changed over time. The establishment of a decentralized administration under the EPRDF embraced the delineation of districts and *kebeles* (the smallest administrative unit in the Ethiopian political system) and their assignment to a distinct lineage. Violent land conflicts driven by the motive of territorial control rather than actual resource use thus becomes increasingly apparent.⁴⁹ A case in point is the massive conflict between various sub-clans of the Reer Abdille sub-branch of the Ogaadeen and the Sheekhaash clan, which sought to establish its own district in East Imi in the Afder zone at the end of the 1990s. Repeated confrontations claimed several hundred casualties and had led by 2003 to the displacement of 14,000 persons.⁵⁰ The restructuring of the administration on an ethno-national basis was especially disadvantageous to (agro-)pastoral groups that shared a joint Somali-Oromo identity, such as the Gabra, Garre, Jarso, Guura, or Guji. Prior to decentralization, strong alliances existed between Oromos and Somalis who rallied around a common Muslim-Cushitic identity and a joint struggle against highland domination. Somali-Oromo brotherliness in the eastern lowlands was decisively disrupted when communities had to settle for affiliation with either the Somali or the Oromiya region and, concomitantly, a Somali or Oromo identity.⁵¹ Numerous districts and *kebeles* along the Somali Region's border are disputed between the Somali, Oromiya, and Afar regions. After a referendum on the status of over 400 *kebeles* along the Somali-Oromiya border in October 2004, Somalis accused their regional administration of betraying Somali interests by "illegally transferring" land to the neighboring Oromiya state.⁵² Government representatives have presented these border disputes as a problem between local inhabitants. In actual fact, party and state officials as well as armed liberation movements have incited and nurtured these ethno-political conflicts by providing money, weapons, and political support to their respective Somali and Oromo kin groups.⁵³

IV. Federal Interventions and Security Concerns

The Ethiopian-Somali elite has been plagued by divisiveness and has lacked political finesse as well as bureaucratic skills ever since assum-

ing control over the region in 1991. However, if public institutions have failed to live up to people's needs and rights, internal political disorder is not the sole explanatory factor. Rather, the federal EPRDF regime regularly used coercive tactics in federal-regional interactions and increasingly intervened in regional matters in the course of the past decade. To be sure, both the imperial government and the Derg had, in typical centralist manner, regularly indulged in micromanaging politics in the Ogaden. Contrary to the authoritarian nature of the past regimes, the TFG charter promised ethno-national self-government and thus raised expectations for more autonomous decision-making. At the beginning of EPRDF rule, federal meddling in Somali state affairs was rather minimal. After consolidating its power throughout the country and following the Somali call for secession in 1994, EPRDF partly reverted to its predecessors' domestic policy in regard to the Somali periphery. National security concerns slowly but surely began to override the new rulers' initial reform agenda toward the "backward region." This included the containment of Somali nationalism and irredentism, pre-emption of Islamic fundamentalism, and safeguarding access to the region's unexploited natural energy reserves.⁵⁴ Perhaps the most effective strategy by the central government has been the skilful exploitation of competition and differences among the region's clan lineages. The numerically smaller non-Ogaaheen groups voluntarily accepted federal patronage with the aim of gaining influence in the region.⁵⁵ They managed to prevent the restoration of exclusive Ogaaheen rule following the downfall of the first ONLF administration in the mid-1990s. Unwittingly, they undermined regional autonomy by inviting the federal government to assume a position of arbitrator in the domestic game of clan rivalry and factionalism.⁵⁶ Ethiopian-Somalis' inability to unite politically clearly benefited federal authorities. It allowed the continuation of the central government's tradition of pitting one clan (or an alliance of Somali clans) against another. This provided a cost-effective way of exerting control over the vast Somali inhabited lowlands, where federal presence to this day is limited to military garrisons.

Upon further examination, federal interventions in the Somali Region go beyond simple divide-and-rule policies. Federal interests are ensured through subtle dealings within and outside the official channels linking federal and regional organs, as well as through outright dictation of policy and the threat or application of force. Federal authorities, specifically the Ministry of Federal Affairs, have developed

variegated tactics to secure influence over the Somali Region's internal politics.⁵⁷ These tactics operate at different levels and bring into play institutional, bureaucratic, political, financial, and military means. The most direct federal interventions were the successive removals of regional presidents and senior politicians. Only three of the nine regional presidents came to office through an election. The rest were handpicked and later ousted, either directly or with the blessing of EPRDF cadres in the federal government.⁵⁸ Counterinsurgency campaigns against the "anti-peace elements," as ONLF fighters are euphemistically called, represented another form of direct federal action. Army officials and regional militia have been involved in persecuting ONLF cadres and sympathizers ever since the fallout between ONLF and EPRDF in 1994. A striking parallel exists with the neighboring Oromiya region, where state-organized repression of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) has reached significant dimensions among the population.⁵⁹ In the case of the ONLF, the federal government pursued a double strategy. On the one hand, it isolated the more militant wing of ONLF and its allies from the political process, while concomitantly backing moderate Ogaadeen and non-Ogaadeen political interests. On the other hand, regional and federal security forces used military force against ONLF rebels and suspected sympathizers. Since the ONLF's adoption of small-scale guerrilla warfare, both sides regularly claim victories in battles against their enemies. Although these claims are not confirmed by independent sources, it seems as if the ONLF is getting stronger in recent years, partly because of Eritrean military assistance.

Between 1998 and 2001 more discrete influence in regional decision making occurred through the deployment of "technical advisors." Senior TPLF/EPRDF cadres of the Ministry of Federal Affairs were dispatched to "advise" regional presidents and bureau heads in the country's peripheral regions.⁶⁰ In Region 5, these party cadres ensured that their host state toe the line of the central government in all important policy matters. After a protest by regional administrations, the practice of dispatching federal advisors to regional capitals on a permanent basis was halted.⁶¹ However, the EPRDF continues to co-steer Somali Region affairs through its cadres, federal ministry bureaucrats, and through intellectual guidance—or rather political indoctrination—of SPDP and state officials. Another seemingly technical practice that allows federal authorities to have power over Ethiopian-Somali officials is *gem gema*, which roughly translates into criticism and self-criticism. *Gem gema* is used in meetings, particularly of the ruling party, whereby officials are

made to admit to committing unlawful acts, including corruption and other conduct unbecoming of a government official.⁶² The strategic value of this process is that it creates a criminal record for important politicians, thereby making them vulnerable to public ridicule and susceptible to federal pressures. In addition to these administrative procedures, federal authorities purposely maintain direct relations with the region's influential clan elders. Elders are canvassed in order to counterbalance the state administration, particularly in order to increase pressure on the regional administration to implement policies advocated by federal authorities.⁶³ Through convocation of town hall meetings in Jjgiga, EPRDF officials have attempted to bring elders into the management of the Somali Region's most pressing problems, namely decentralization, regional border disputes and, time and again, insecurity. Many elders enjoy a kind of popular legitimacy and independent-mindedness that the region's top officials have lacked.

Countering Islamic fundamentalists has become another cornerstone of the EPRDF's agenda in dealing with its southeastern lowlands. Over the past decade, the central government has maintained a rhetoric of imminent dangers posed to Ethiopia by adherents of Al-Itihaad al-Islami (Islamic Union). Al-Itihaad had been created in the late 1980s by circles of Islamic study groups and Muslim Brotherhood cells, which were mainly composed of young, Saudi-educated Somali clerics following a puritanical *salafist* interpretation of Islam.⁶⁴ Al-Itihaad established a branch in Region 5 in mid-1991 and was initially registered as a legal political party. Frictions between the TFG and Al-Itihaad appeared when the latter gradually militarized its activities and followers in 1992. Although several militant Somali Islamic organizations had appeared after the downfall of the Siyaad Barre regime, Al-Itihaad was the only group to pursue a truly regional and military strategy within the Somali-inhabited Horn of Africa.⁶⁵ The EPRDF's reaction to Al-Itihaad was as swift as it was violent. Between 1992 and 1996, Ethiopia successfully destroyed Al-Itihaad's military capabilities within Region 5, but also in the Gedo region of neighboring Somalia. With the advent of the U.S.-led "war on terror" in the aftermath of September 11 and speculations about al-Qa'eda cells in Somalia, the Ethiopian government was quick to label Al-Itihaad a terrorist organization and, on occasion, claimed that they had enlisted the financial and material support of foreign Islamists.⁶⁶ The government tried to exploit the global anti-terrorism discourse by portraying its ONLF and OLF armed opposition as terrorist organizations to the

domestic and international audience. By joining the global coalition against terrorism, the EPRDF secured American economic and military aid. By the end of 2003, U.S. marines had established small outposts, so-called “lily pads,” within the Somali Region where they monitor the Ethiopian-Somali border and implement minor development activities intended to win the sympathies of the local population.⁶⁷

V. Between Integration, Independence, and Irredentism

Fifteen years after the establishment of the Somali Regional State and the official introduction of the concept of a “Somali nation” within the Ethiopian body politic, the question is to what degree, if at all, an Ethiopian-Somali identity has materialized. The constant flux of political developments in the Somali Region and the Horn of Africa as a whole defies sweeping generalizations on the topic. Bear in mind the proviso that one can distinguish between more exogenous and more endogenous narratives on the identity of Somalis in Ethiopia. Collective identity is a dynamic phenomenon, which is constantly constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. Therefore, it is of importance to consider the totality of narratives, external and internal, pertaining to a group’s identity. How do outsiders apprehend the political orientation, actual and desired, of Region 5’s inhabitants? As the guarantor of ethnic federalism, the EPRDF federal government obviously propagates the maxim that Somalis are able to develop and promote their own culture and political identity while expressing allegiance to the Ethiopian state. Conversely and despite the official rhetoric, the majority of non-Somali highland Ethiopians views all Somalis (whether living within or outside the country’s territory) as alien to Ethiopian nationhood. The Ogaden war is vividly remembered and Somalis are often portrayed as Ethiopia’s enemies. The Somali civil war and state collapse have enforced popular clichés of Somalis being an “anarchic,” “dangerous,” and essentially “unreliable” people. The external recognition of an Ethiopian-Somali identity within Ethiopia is thus confined to the advocates of ethnic federalism, i.e., the politico-bureaucratic state elite.

Similarly, while a multitude of opinions exists among members of the global Somali diaspora,⁶⁸ most reject the possibility of a distinct Ethiopian-Somali identity. In regard to the region’s political fate, the diaspora is divided between adherents of a more pan-Somali nationalist orientation and defenders of Ogaden self-determination. Those belonging to the first category consider Region 5 as part and par-

cel of the colonially divided Somali nation and therefore refer to the Somali Region as Western Somalia (*Soomaali Galbeed*). In contrast, Ogaden nationalists advocate self-determination on the basis of the entire Somali inhabited territory within Ethiopia. As a contributor to an online chat forum pointed out, “there is nothing called Somali *galbeed*, it is Ogadenia.”⁶⁹ These narratives on Ethiopian-Somali, Ogaden, and Western Somali collective identity indicate the multiple and contested interpretations of who Somalis in Ethiopia are and who they might be. These divergences constitute the background for much of the region’s divided political leadership. The result is a fragmented polity that ranges from a minority sentiment of belonging to the Ethiopian nation-state, to a strong drive for independence as fought for by the ONLF, to economic integration with parts of neighboring Somalia.

Overt pledges of allegiance to the Ethiopian nation-state by Ethiopian-Somalis are exceptional, often made with an ulterior motive and mostly restricted to members of the region’s ruling party and bureaucracy. Irrespective of the official idiom of “Ethiopian-Somaliness,” economic and social integration into the Ethiopian highland economy characterizes some peripheral enclaves within the Somali region. Thus the Somali (-Oromo) agro-pastoralists of what was formerly known as East Hararghe, a territory stretching from the slopes of the Harar highlands to the confines of today’s Jigjiga zone, are more strongly involved in trade and exchange with the Ethiopian highlands than Somalis inhabiting the Haud and Ogaden plateau.⁷⁰ Moreover, communities living along the historic trade route between Harar and the port of Berbera in adjoining Somaliland share a sense of attachment to the Ethiopian highlands. The smaller Darood and Dir clan lineages inhabiting the northeastern fraction of the Somali Region have generally opted for a more conciliatory position towards the EPRDF government. Arguably, they have done so because they fear marginalization by sectarian Ogaadeen nationalists, rather than due to sympathy for Ethiopian ethnic federalism.

The ONLF is the most prominent organization advocating self-determination and ultimately independence for Region 5, or, as it calls it, “Ogadenia.” The ONLF’s origin is traced back to divisions that emerged during the 1980s within the region’s historic liberation front, the WSLF.⁷¹ The ONLF was clandestinely established in August 1984 in Mogadishu. ONLF’s current deputy-chairman, Mohamed Ismail, proclaimed its formation, in 1986 in Algiers, as an opposition in exile, “accountable only to the people of Ogaden and independent

of any government in Mogadishu.”⁷² Contrary to the WSLF, which had sought reunification with Somalia, the ONLF demanded a popular plebiscite to decide whether “Ogadenia” should remain within Ethiopia, merge with Somalia, or aim for independence. Many of the ONLF’s founders had been educated in the 1960s and 1970s in Arab countries and some of them pursued Baathist and Islamist tendencies. They distanced themselves from the older WSLF nationalists who had grown up during the heyday of Somali nationalism in the 1940s and 1950s and whose understanding of politics was strongly parochial and clientelistic. The ONLF advocated a more dogmatic program based on Ogaadeen particularism. Initially, The ONLF concentrated on expanding and consolidating its organizational structure among the diaspora, where it deliberately recruited educated younger members of the Ogaadeen clan. In the mid-1980s, parts of ONLF also connected with radical Islamists of the future Al-Itihaad, who shared a similar aversion to pan-Somali nationalism rooted in genealogical interests.⁷³

Via the massive wave of returnees to the Ogaden following Somalia’s disintegration, the ONLF managed to establish a presence within the territory it sought to liberate. After falling out with the EPRDF and subsequent military confrontations, the ONLF split into different factions in 1995. The “hawks,” under the leadership of Sheikh Ibrahim Abdallah, took up armed struggle in the bush. A smaller faction, led by Bashir Abdi Hassan, sought a direct arrangement with the pro-EPRDF ESDL, while a third group of Ogaadeen intellectuals and businessmen aimed at a negotiated arrangement with the ESDL, while keeping ONLF’s organizational autonomy. Since the “outlawed” ONLF took to the bush, the organization’s further development has become rather opaque. The EPRDF succeeded in fragmenting the ONLF by engaging its more moderate members in negotiations and into the region’s patronage and spoils system. This in turn radicalized the hard-liners within the ONLF, who managed to gradually increase their military strength and expand their operations in the past decade. The ONLF’s top leaders, including Chairman Admiral Mohamed Omar Osman, reside in Western countries such as Denmark, Germany, and the U.K. Their fighters operate a predominantly hit-and-run insurgency in Fiq, Korahe, Degehabur, Wardheer, and Godey zones of the region. In these areas the ONLF mostly draws on the popular support of members of the Ogaadeen clan lineages of Mohammed Zubeyr, Bah Gerri, Makahil, and Tolomogge. With the help of this grassroots support, it is able to control the movement of people and goods in these areas. While

the ONLF's military activities are limited, its network of informants and sympathizers covers almost the whole Somali Region. The ONLF claims to represent all Somalis living in Ethiopia but, in actual fact, most non-Ogaadeen do not support the ONLF, which they view as primarily defending the interests of Ogaadeen lineages. However, it would be wrong to assume that ONLF benefits from the unconditional support of all Ogaadeen. At any given point in the post-1991 era, Ogaadeen politicians and elders have defended positions across the entire political spectrum. The pro-EPRDF administrations in the region, from the ESDL to the SPDP, all included strong Ogaadeen representation. In recent years criticism of the ONLF has increasingly been expressed by Ethiopian-Somalis who question the expediency of pursuing an armed struggle instead of a political solution through negotiations with the federal government.

Political conditions since 1991 have not been conducive for Somalia's irredentist claims to the Ogaden or an Ethiopian-Somali movement for reunification with Somalia. Over a dozen Somali peace processes have failed and Somali faction leaders have proven unable to reconcile and restore effective authority.⁷⁴ In the continuous absence of an effective Somali central government and Somaliland's secessionist drive, the quest to reunify all Somali-inhabited territories under one state has become temporarily moot. However, the collapse of the Somali Republic resulted in an unforeseen "Greater Somalia," not on the basis of a political, but instead an economic integration. The complete privatization of trade, transport, and finance boosted the free flow of goods, services, and information within the Somali-inhabited territories.⁷⁵ Region 5 is firmly embedded in this larger Somali political economy. Contraband smuggled into the region from Somaliland, Puntland, and central Somalia mainly consists of non-perishable food items, clothes, and electronic and consumer goods. In return, *qat* (a mildly narcotic leaf), livestock, and vegetables are exported along the trade routes connecting the Ogaden with Somalia's commercial centers.⁷⁶ The Somali and Somaliland shilling are widely used in the Somali Region as a parallel currency to the Ethiopian birr, which, although backed by the central government, is not available in large enough quantities. Cross-border kin distribution further connects the regions' inhabitants to neighboring Djibouti (the Issa and Gadabursi), Somaliland (the Gadabursi and Isaaq), Puntland (the Harti), central Somalia (the Hawiye, Marehan, Digil, Mirifle, and other kin groups) and northeast Kenya (groups belonging to the Daarood family as well as others). Although

the interactions within these clan territories are not irredentist in the conventional sense, they shape to a considerable degree Ethiopian-Somali identity as members of a Somali common economic market.

VI. Continuities and Ruptures in the Ogaden

With the introduction of ethnic federalism, Ethiopia's Somali Region underwent yet another twist in its intricate relations with the central government of Ethiopia and the Ethiopian highland. From the imperial governments of Menelik to Haile Selassie and from the Derg dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam to the EPRDF's revolutionary democracy under Meles Zenawi, politics in the Ogaden have been repeatedly reconfigured, but have shown continuities that have transcended the various regimes. At the core of these continuities is the Somali Region's character as a frontier space where the state's judicial and bureaucratic forms of control have encountered rejection and outright resistance. The Somali Region is among Eastern Africa's "pastoral fringe regions" that continuously challenge the national political structures of the central state.⁷⁷ The clash manifested between the Ethiopian state bureaucracy and Somali segmentary society is, however, not a zero-sum game between incompatible elements. As research from other parts of the world demonstrates, state institutions and clan-based kinship have their own historicity, are highly interrelated, and are mutually constitutive rather than exclusive.⁷⁸

Several continuities have marked the Ethiopian-Somali frontier since its annexation by the Ethiopian empire. First, state penetration has remained weak, with state institutions enjoying little legitimacy or significance for local communities. Somali elders manage community affairs on the basis of a customary cosmology, conflict resolution practices, and intergroup contracts (*xeer*). Second, the federal government exerts direct control and influence over the Somali Region via its military garrisons as well as indirect rule through the region's ruling party. The central state employs the stick more often than the carrot in trying to integrate the Somalis into the Ethiopian nation-state. Lastly, armed resistance to the "*habesha*" (highland rulers) and their Somali allies carries on in the form of the ONLF's insurgency. The Ogaadeen rebels build upon popular frustration with the EPRDF government's deceptive promises of genuine Somali self-determination and democratization. Beyond these permanencies, different rulers and regimes at the center of the Ethiopian state have transformed relations with its Somali

periphery and the politics therein. To clarify, the following phases of Ethiopian rule in its Somali-inhabited territory can be differentiated.⁷⁹ Between 1850 and 1920, governance in the Ogaden was characterized by a fiscal-military mode. The region was victim to predatory behavior by imperial soldiers who collected taxes and livestock by raiding Somali pastoralists. In the second phase, between 1920 and 1977, the central government partly replaced the military-fiscal mode with an effort to increase bureaucratic control over the region from the center. Selective repression continued, but the imperial government increasingly engaged in patrimonial relations with loyal Ethiopian-Somali leaders and clan groups who were co-opted into the provincial administration.

The period between 1977 and 1991, under the Derg and following the traumatic Ogaden war, was dominated by systematic repression of Ethiopian-Somali dissent and resistance. Garrison socialism and counterinsurgency strategies made the inclusion of Somalis into local governance impossible. In the most recent phase, since 1991, Ethiopian-Somalis have directly administered their regional state within a federal framework. As this article argues, this democratic experiment reverted to more manipulative interventions by federal authorities in the mid-1990s. Today the central government applies a mixture of patrimonial and coercive tactics that are a reminder of the second phase (1920–1977) of Ethiopian rule over the Ogaden.

To conclude, Gesheker's prognosis, made two decades ago, that "an Ethiopian state whose rulers permitted Somali self-determination would implicitly consent to its own territorial disintegration" has proven quite accurate.⁸⁰ Although Ethiopian-Somalis formally enjoy autonomy and self-government, the EPRDF has made sure that political developments within the region do not depart from its agenda. Behind the curtains of decentralized democracy, federal authorities call the tunes, with the regional government as the involuntary conductor faced with an increasingly frustrated Somali audience.

Notes

1. This article is an expanded translation of Tobias Hagmann and Mohamud H. Khalif, "La Région Somali d'Éthiopie: Entre Intégration, Indépendance et Irrédentisme," *Politique Africaine* 99, Octobre (2005): 43–62. Tobias Hagmann is indebted to his research assistants, Dr. Ahmed Mohamed and Abdillahi A. Dakane, for translating interviews and discussions, and to the Pastoral Development Coordination Office of the Somali Regional State for facilitating research permission in 2003 and 2004. This paper is partially based

on work supported by the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South: Research Partnerships for Mitigating Syndromes of Global Change.

2. IRIN 2000.

3. Geshekte 1985: 6.

4. Lewis 2002; Markakis 1987; Zewde 2002.

5. Hagmann 2005.

6. We use the designation “Ethiopian-Somali” rather than “Ogaden Somalis” to refer to all those Somalis inhabiting the Somali Region. Since the introduction of ethnically based political competition in 1991, Ogaden is increasingly perceived to designate the Ogaadeen genealogical groups, which are not congruent with all genealogical groups inhabiting the area. The use of the term “Ethiopian-Somali” is for the sake of linguistic convenience only and does not imply a position on political loyalty or identity. To distinguish Ogaden as a geographical area from the clan, we use the official Somali spelling “Ogaadeen” to refer to the latter. Throughout this article, we use the geographic names Ogaden, Region 5, and the Somali Region interchangeably.

7. Drysdale 1964.

8. Mesfin Wolde Mariam 1964.

9. Tareke 2000.

10. Brons et al. 1995.

11. Africa Watch 1991.

12. Interviews conducted in the Somali Region in 2003 and 2004.

13. Africa Watch 1991.

14. Hogg 1996.

15. Brabant 1994.

16. Abdi I. Samatar 2004.

17. Interview with a regional civil servant, Jigjiga, 12 July 2003.

18. The ONLF as a party had the most seats but did not have a large enough majority to form the government.

19. Abdi I. Samatar 2004.

20. Markakis 1996.

21. On the EPRDF’s “satellite” parties, see Aalen 2002.

22. Schröder 1998.

23. Markakis 1996.

24. Authors’ translation. Ollivier 1995: 163.

25. NEBE 1995.

26. Wardheer News 2005b.

27. Abdi I. Samatar 2004: 1144.

28. These are Abdillahi Mohamed Saadi (January–July 1993), Hassan Gire Qualinle (July 1993–April 1994), Ugas Abdirahman Mahamud ‘Kani’ (April–December 1994), Ahmed Makahil Hussein (December 1994–July 1995), Eid Dahir Farah (July 1995–mid-1997), Mahamed Macalin ‘Khadar’ (mid-1997–September 2000), Abdirashid Dulane (Septem-

ber 2000–July 2003), Omar Jibril Abubaker (July 2003–September 2005), Abdillahi Hassan Mohammed ‘Lugbuur’ (since September 2005).

29. Interview with a former journalist, Harshin, 18 June 2003.

30. IRIN 2003.

31. Roble 2005.

32. Hagmann, forthcoming.

33. Markakis 1994: 76.

34. NEBE 2004.

35. NEBE 2005.

36. Abraham et al. 2000.

37. Hagmann, forthcoming; Lister 2004.

38. Interview with the former administrator of Jigjiga zone, Jigjiga, 14 July 2003.

39. A first census was conducted in 1994, producing a population number of approximately eight million people. It soon became apparent that this figure reflected a strategic move by political leaders who sought to maximize the demographic weight of the Somali Region within the country rather than reflecting actual numbers. A second census yielded the figure of approximately 3.5 million predominantly ethnic Somalis living in the region (CSA 1998).

40. Devereux 2006: 118.

41. Other Ethiopian frontier regions are Afar, Benishangul, and Gambella.

42. Ahmed Y. Farah 1996.

43. Alemseged Abbay 2004; Young 1998.

44. Markakis 1996: 570.

45. Hagmann 2005.

46. Erdmann and Engel 2002.

47. Lister 2004: 22.

48. See, for example, Faisal Roble’s (1996) account of how the Gari and Jarso clan elders decided upon candidates to run in the 1995 national and regional elections.

49. As more and more clan groups claimed their own district within the region, the number has risen from an initial 41 districts during the 1995 elections to 53 by end of 2005.

50. Ahmed A. Egeh 2003.

51. This observation squares with Vaughan’s (2003) argument that federalism “ethnified” Ethiopian politics.

52. Wardheer News 2005a.

53. Interview with former government official, Qalafo, 24 July 2004.

54. Mohamud H. Khalif 2000.

55. Ishaq, Issa, Gadabursi, Gerri, Gurgura, Rer Barre, Hawiye, Dulbahante, Majerteen, Jidwak, Shekash, and Marehan.

56. Schröder 1998.

57. Established in 1998 as the Regional Affairs Section of the Prime Minister’s Office and transformed into a proper ministry in 2001, the Ministry of Federal Affairs oversees

decentralization, conflict resolution, pastoral development, and security matters in the regional states.

58. Hagmann 2005; Markakis 1996; Abdi I. Samatar 2004.

59. Human Rights Watch 2005.

60. Vaughan (2003: 215) explains that, "the fact that these advisers are primarily Amharas and Tigrayans, and are regarded as EPRDF cadres, has done little to endear them to the people of the regional capitals." Abdi I. Samatar (2004) gives detailed examples of intervention and manipulation by the technical advisors on various internal regional matters.

61. Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003.

62. In June 2004, federal authorities pressured regional government officials into signing a declaration according to which the latter had failed to fulfil their duties in the development of the region. Interview with former government official, Godey, 1 July 2004.

63. Abdi I. Samatar 2004.

64. Menkhaus 2002.

65. Marchal 2004.

66. Medhane Tadesse 2002.

67. As one of the authors observed during field research in 2003 and 2004, these outposts include a temporary camp near Jigjiga as well as a compound in Godey town. The U.S. military is expanding its network of outposts in the course of the "war against terror."

68. Nurrudin Farah 2000.

69. SomaliNet Forum 2005.

70. Cossins 1971; Gebissa 2004.

71. Reliable information on the ONLF is sparse and all information relating to its organization and activities is extremely sensitive and difficult to gather through field research within the Somali Region. Some insights are provided by Ogaden Online (2001).

72. Interview with an ONLF member, Jeddah, 22 June 2005.

73. Schröder 1998.

74. Ethiopia has a vital interest in preventing the restoration of a strong central government in Mogadishu. Consequently, it has maintained a military presence in Somalia and sponsored a number of Somali faction leaders.

75. Little 2003.

76. Teka et al. 2002.

77. Abbink 1997.

78. Schatz 2004.

79. Barnes 2000.

80. Geshekte 1985: 1.

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