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## The Somali in Ethiopia

John Markakis

Persuading the Somali living in Ethiopia to shed their irredentist aspirations and the dream of Greater Somalia was a conspicuous initial success for the regime that came to power in that country in 1991 (see *ROAPE* 59, 1994). Undoubtedly, the disintegration of the Somali state itself had something to do with it. Be that as it may, the Somali apparently accepted the offer of self-government within a decentralized Ethiopian state and plunged enthusiastically into political competition for control of their regional government. They did this in characteristic Somali fashion: each clan produced its own political party, and soon there were more than a dozen. The Ogaden, the dominant clan in the region that traditionally bore its name, was initially represented by two organizations. The veteran Western Somalia Liberation Front (WSLF), founded in the mid-1970s, was now overshadowed by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), formed a decade later by defectors from the WSLF who had exchanged Somali irredentism for Ogaden nationalism and aspired to set up their own state. Two Islamic organizations also made their appearance – one representing militant fundamentalism, the other the traditional religious leadership. While both aspired to transcend clan boundaries, their support, as their names indicate, came mainly from the Ogaden clan. The formal name of the first is Ogaden Islamic Union, and of the second Islamic Solidarity Party – Western Somalia – Ogaden.

In the first elections for the regional government, held in 1992, the ONLF won around 70 seats and the WSLF 10, out of a total 110 seats in the regional assembly. With an additional 7 seats won by Tadamun (Solidarity), the traditionalist Islamic party, the Ogaden commanded an absolute majority in the regional

assembly and took control of the regional government. Both the president and vice-president of the region were ONLF members, and the Front also dominated the regional executive. The ONLF's commitment to the new order in Ethiopia was not solid. Its chairman, Sheikh Ibrahim Abdalla, a graduate of Islamic jurisprudence from the university of Riyadh, was reluctant to accept Ethiopian sovereignty, and stayed in Saudi Arabia. In his absence, Abdulahi Mohammed Sadi, a former WSLF member and one of the founders of the ONLF, became president of what was designated at the time as Region 5. He avowed to test Ethiopian intentions and, if necessary, to exercise to right to self-determination. Relations between the two leaders were far from smooth, and the ONLF was riven with factionalism. By contrast, the fundamentalist Islamic group, made no secret of its opposition to any collaboration with Ethiopia's rulers, and refused to take part in the elections.

The Somali claimed Dire Dawa, the most important town in southeast Ethiopia, for their regional capital, but this claim was strongly contested by the Oromo. The central government settled the issue by making Dire Dawa a separate self-governing entity. The ONLF then chose Gode, at the western end of the Somali region, as the capital. A remote and inaccessible township, of some 12,000 inhabitants, bereft of road connections and facilities, including telephones, it lies deep into Ogaden clan territory.

Hussein Mohammed Adam observed (*ROAPE* 54, 1992) that Somali society is obsessively preoccupied with 'the issue of equality and recognition on the part of individuals, families, sub-clans, clans and clan families', and the commonest *causis belli* of clan conflict is the rise of one clan to a position of dominance. Not surprisingly, Ogaden control of the regional government united all the other clans in opposition, and they set about to derail the newly-established regional adminis-

tration. They took advantage of the fact that the regional leadership spent several months early 1993 in Addis Ababa, arranging for the transfer of government personnel, assets and records to region 5, a time when sizeable hotel bills and other expenses were incurred. When they returned to Gode in July, they were accused of fund misappropriation by the Ministry of Justice in Addis Ababa. The entire regional executive council was replaced, and the regional president, Abdulahi Mohammed Sadi, was thrown in prison. When he was released on bail, he fled abroad.

He was replaced by Hassan Jire Qalinle, a former pilot of the Police Air Wing in Somalia. He had been elected as a member of the WSLF and switched to the ONLF afterwards. In February 1994, the assembly of region 5 met in Jijiga, and in a outburst against the alleged interference of the central government in Somali regional affairs, it voted to exercise the right of self-determination, i.e., secession. Less than two months later, Hassan Jire and his deputy were removed for 'preventing the people of the region from enjoying the benefits of the transitional period' (*Ethiopian Herald*, 9 April 1994). He was replaced by Abdurahman Ugaz Mahmud, who had been director of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission branch in Gode. An Ogaden clansman, he was supported by the other clans because he was not a member of the ONLF. In August of that year, nearly all the bureau heads and their deputies in the regional administration were dismissed for corruption. Abdurahman himself was dismissed in December 1994 for 'obstructing development projects' (*Ethiopian Herald*, 6 December 1994). The vice-president, Ahmed Makahil Hussein, also an Ogaden clansman, became acting president.

Needless to say, there was preciously little sign of development in the region during these years. On the other hand, the political struggle intensified and the stakes were raised recklessly. The opposition

clans strove to forge a united front against the Ogaden, encouraged by the central government's growing disenchantment with the ONLF. Initially, the government wisely had stayed out of Somali regional affairs, and had not sponsored an affiliate political organization in region 5, as it did nearly everywhere in Ethiopia. However, it soon began to have second thoughts. Lacking firm leadership and direction, the ONLF spoke with many voices, some calling for secession and others for acceptance of the reformed Ethiopian state. The central government was involved in the removal of three successive Somali regional presidents, none of who stayed in office more than seven months. A number of regional officials and ONLF members were also imprisoned. All were charged with embezzlement of funds, abuse of authority and sundry other crimes. This effectively crippled the regional administration, alienated the Ogaden clansmen, and provoked sporadic clashes between government forces and members of the ONLF. Itihad, which was threatening insurrection, eagerly joined the hostilities.

The effort to unite the opposition bore fruit early in February 1994, with the formation of the Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL), at a meeting held at Hurso military training camp near Dire Dawa, which lasted three days and was addressed by then Prime Minister Tamrat Layne. He was accompanied by the two Somali members of his cabinet, who became president and secretary general respectively of the new party. The president, Abdul Majid Hussein, was educated in Ethiopia and Europe and had been an international civil servant before becoming Minister of External Economic Cooperation in Ethiopia. He is an Ishaq, a clan which has been feuding violently for decades with the Ogaden over possession of the Haud pasturelands along the eastern border. Samsudin Ahmed, the secretary general of ESDL, is a Gadabursi, and was a civil servant in Addis Ababa before becoming vice-minister in the Ministry of

Mineral Resources and Energy. Neither of them had previous connection with Somali nationalist and clan politics. The ESDL claimed twelve clans, including the Ogaden, were represented in its Executive Committee.

The day before the Hurso meeting began, then President Meles Zenawi addressed a gathering of Somali elders and politicians in Harar urging them to cooperate. He pointedly warned that the right of secession was to be exercised 'by the people and the nation, not a political party or a clan' (*Ethiopia Herald*, 11 February 1994). Meles returned to the region in January 1995, to address a conference on peace and development at Kebri Dehar. The leadership of most groups attended, including a delegation of the ONLF led by Abdirazak Tibba, a member of its executive committee. There they signed an agreement to keep the peace and participate in the elections. Itihad stayed away.

The Ogaden now made an effort to close ranks in the face of the massed clan opposition. The WSLF, which had come out unequivocally against secession, joined with Tadamun to form the Western Somali Democratic Party (WSDP) in 1994. The ONLF was invited to join, and a delegation led by Omar Nur, a legendary WSLF commander in the 1970s, engaged in discussions. They proved fruitless allegedly because Hassan Jire, who had earlier returned to the WSLF, was made leader of the WSDP.

National and regional elections were held again in mid-1995. The ESDL contested all the districts in the region with candidates chosen for their local clan ties, and had the advantage of ample funds and the backing of the ruling Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Prior to the elections, some Ogaden constituencies were merged, giving rise to charges of gerrymandering. The task of the ESDL was made easier by an ONLF split on the issue of participation. Having visited the region in 1993-94, Sheikh

Ibrahim Abdalla returned to Saudi Arabia and remained opposed participation. Shortly before the elections, a splinter group led by Bashir Abdi Hassan registered as the 'legal' ONLF in proceeded to contest the elections. That it was doing so under adverse conditions was made clear when the National Elections Board twice warned its officials in the Somali region not to obstruct the registration of ONLF candidates, and balloting had to be postponed for nearly a month in some district due to ONLF protests. Familiar incidents were reported in the course of the elections; ballot boxes in some polling stations disappeared, elsewhere they were found full before voting began, the results in three districts became the subject of investigation, and there was a storm of complaints from the losers. Of the 139 seats in the regional assembly, the ESDL won 75, the 'legal' ONLF 18, the WSDP 15, and 24 seats went to independents. ESDL also won 23 seats in the Federal Assembly out of the 25 assigned to the Somali region, the WSDP 1, and 1 was won by an independent.

Now came the turn of the Ogaden to have a try at derailing a regional government controlled by other clans. The 'legal' ONLF and the WSDP members refused to take their seats in the regional assembly until the investigation of the results in the three contested districts was concluded. They claimed the assembly lacked a quorum because it mustered only 54 out of its full membership of 139. Ahmed Makahil Hussein, the former acting president who was re-elected in 1995, refused to vacate his office. He was arrested and is now in prison awaiting trial. Id Tahir, the new regional president, who is from the Ishaq clan, claimed that 76 members were in attendance in the first brief session of the regional assembly. The first act of the new regional government was to shift the capital from Gode to Jijiga in the east. A larger (about 30,000 pop.) and lively trade centre, Jijiga lies outside Ogaden clan territory and near Ishaq grounds. Region five was officially named

the Somali National Administrative Region.

The new political order in Ethiopia does not seem to have affected the categorical imperative of Somali political practice, which is clannishness. Opposition to the threat of Ogaden dominance is what brought the other clans together in the ESDL. It was to be expected that having gained the upper hand, the ESDL itself would become the arena of clan rivalry. In order to delay the inevitable, the League has not called a meeting either of its congress or its central committee since its founding. Although it is supposed to meet every six months, the regional assembly did not meet for the second time until September 1996. Nor has the region held elections for local administration, as have the other regions in Ethiopia. Nonetheless, there were several announced defections from the ESDL during this time. Marginalised in the new political order, the Ogaden clan turned defiant once again. With its leadership in prison or abroad, the 'illegal' ONLF drifted on a collision course with the central government. In June 1996, an agreement was announced in London between this group and the Oromo Liberation Front, an organization that has flirted with secession and has declared war on the regime in Ethiopia. The two agreed to coordinate their activities in the 'diplomatic, political and military fields'. Similar agreements are said to have been concluded with Itihad and the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia.

It was also inevitable that Ishaq prominence would make it the target of other clans. On 8 July 1996, there was an attempt to assassinate the ESDL chairman, Abdul Majid Hussein. He survived multiple wounds, while two of his bodyguards were killed. A spokesman for Itihad in Mogadisho claimed the fundamentalist group was responsible. Afterwards, the Ethiopian authorities arrested numerous Ogaden political activists, including members of the regional assem-

bly. Among the latter were Sheikh Abdi Nassir Sheikh, the long-time secretary general of the WSLF, and Colonel Ibrahim Aden Dolal, former political commissioner of the Somali armed forces. All told, six regional assembly members are in prison in Jijiga.

Itihad appears to be the main problem for the Ethiopian government, which blames this fundamentalist group for attacks against its soldiers in the Ogaden and several hotel bombings in Addis Ababa and other towns. Itihad is closely linked to its sister movement in Somalia, whose stronghold is the Gedo region in southern Somalia across the border from Ethiopia. Itihad established bases there to carry out crossborder raids into the Ogaden. Ethiopians know from long experience that it is futile to chase guerrilla bands in this vast, arid region, if they find sanctuary on the other side of the border. Consequently, the Ethiopians recently carried the fight into the Gedo region with ground and air attacks. They seemed to have found an ally in the Somali National Front, a Marehan clan organization which competes with the fundamentalists for control of Gedo. Tragically, the dark shadow of war is falling once more over the Ogaden, a region that has known little peace for more than three decades.

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## Eritrea: Constitutional Forum

*Zemehret Yohannes*

The Eritrean people have been discussing the draft constitution since its approval by the National Assembly. We started with the big towns and went all the way to small villages. Discussions were also conducted in various places across the Middle East, Europe, America and Aus-