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Violence against Somalis and a Weakened EPRDF

By Faisal Roble
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Ethiopia's political crisis is at its zenith since the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power in 1991. A multitude of disorders come at a time when the once powerful EPRDF shows weakness and partiality to Somalis. A sign of this weakness is its failure to bring under control the Oromo "Qeerro" (the Afan Oromo term for "young men) killers commissioned by Oromia. Although the killing of innocent civilians has taken place in many regions, [the deadliest organized violence befall Somalis](#).

Stubborn Imperial Culture Impede Democratization

Successive regimes in Ethiopia have attempted to reform the ancient empire created by emperor Menelik II at the turn of the last century. One such attempt was the 1948 constitution promulgated by Emperor Haile Selassie, King of Kings, and the Lion of Judah. This change came at the urge of the US administration at the time. The 1948 constitutional reform sought to create a "democratic monarchy." Its implementation document, however, conditioned the provision of services (education, health, water and power) to non-Christians only if they first accept the "Dawit," or the "Gospel" by non-Christians. In the document, Muslims (Somalis and Muslim Oromos) were referred to as "aramanes," or "non-believers." That reform ended up in the dust bins sooner than the King anticipated.

Following was the Dergi's socialist regime. With yet another constitution, the Dergi tried to reform the ancient empire and win the hearts and minds of the masses by nationalizing agricultural resources, reforming land tenure including urban real estate, channeling development to the peasantry class, and giving limited "self-rule" to certain regions. A case in point is the "Ogaden ras-gaz," or "Ogaden self-rule." Even that failed for it did not fully address *"the right of nations and nationalities, including and up secession."* It also squeezed Somalis into 1/3rd of their territory, by putting most of Fafan region in Eastern Hararge, and Shinile into what it erroneously called "Issa and Gurgura ras-gaz"

With a new charter that subsequently evolved into a federalist constitution (1994), the empire created by Emperor Menelik II had morphed into a multinational ethnic-based federalist state. The late Meles Zenawi as the leader of EPRDF has made a meaningful attempt to extend full-scale self-rule to all nationalities. Such rights were codified in Article 39 of the Ethiopian Federal Democratic constitution.

Meles Zenawi and his cohorts' efforts to address the empire's internal dynamism have roots in the radical movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

At about 1969, a dozen of PLO-trained commands led by the late Mohammed Ali, an Aden-born Somali, crossed the Gulf of Aden on speed boats. They had planned to start an armed struggle. Before Mr. Ali and his team, which included Easter (Muslim) Oromos, reached the border on their way to the highlands of Jinacsane, Dakhato, Faafan, and Gaaramulata, they were apprehended by Somalia. The commandos remained in jail until 1975.

Once freed from prison, they were joined by Yusuf Dheere, Abdi Shimbir, Ahmed Gadhle, Mohamed Tube, Ahmed Ali Nuur, Ahmed Yasin (Burcawi), and others to form the armed wing of the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF).

There were Eritrean groups on the north pressuring the empire. Other than that, WSLF is believed to have launched the first armed struggle in Ethiopia on behalf of "the question of nations and nationalities." Groups such as the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Sidama People's Liberation Front, and the Afar Liberation Front came to the scene much later.



Parallel to these armed enterprises were intellectual and/or radical groups that synthesized the question of the empire's nations and nationalities question. Groups like the Ethiopian People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, and All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MESON) later on developed into left-leaning political parties. The common thread binding these groups with national movements was the commitment to the notion of the equality for nations and nationalities. Another commonality was that the Somali government helped and financed most of these progressive movements.

Whereas radical thinkers and affiliated movements in Europe/America, Algeria as well Addis Ababa supplied the theoretical framework for the struggle for equality in Ethiopia, Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) spearheaded the armed aspect of the revolution. Dismantling or reforming what was called the "prison of nations," alias the Ethiopian empire, was a common value held by all. Today's ethnic-based federal constitution, therefore, has its roots in this era of armed/radical movements.

Meles' Ethnic federalism represented a serious effort to address the vexing question of nations and nationalities and reform the empire. Unfortunately, beneath the veneer of the federal system Meles created still sit layers of stubborn Dergi and feudal cultures inherited from previous systems that resist democratization and the equality of nations and nationalities.

Therefore, the root cause of the current Ethiopian crisis is nothing more than the failure of Addis Ababa to fully implement, as Herman Cohen said, the issue of self-determination as stipulated in Article 39, which states the following: "*Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession.*"

As will be argued bellow, it is this failure on the part of EPRDF – to protect lives and properties - that fueled the massacre against Somalis.

Somali Massacres in a Historical Timeline

Episodic massacres of Somalis are not uncommon. As far back as the beginning of the 20th century, Somalis have witnessed massive mayhems both in the hands of European explorers and by gun touting Abyssinian colonizers. In “Seventeen Trips through Somaliland and A Visit to Abyssinia,” Major H. G.C. Swayne of England chronicles a gory level of mayhem against lowland Somalis in the hands of Abyssinians. These expeditions and their associated massacres were part and parcel of the violent annexation of Somali territories to the Abyssinian Empire.

Then was the large scale massacre in British Somaliland in the hands of Great Britain’s troops that mercilessly tailed and harassed Sayyid Mohammed Abdille Hassan of the Dervish movement.

Equally unforgettable is multiple massacres carried out by Ras Mekonin, governor of Harar and father of Emperor Haile Selassie. As if that was not enough, Emperor Haile Selassie followed suit of his father’s footsteps, and carried out several cruel expeditions into Banka Diida Waaleed, Dhagaxbuur, Qorahay, Ina Guuxaa, as well as in Aisho all of which took place in the 1950s and early 1960s, respectively. The hitherto history of Somalis in Ethiopia has been the history of massacre of subjugated people.

Historical cruelty against Somalis in the 20th century prompted on Arab sociologist to write this: the two most oppressed communities are Jews in Yamen and Muslims in Abyssinia. He continued to say that Jews in Yamen live rats-condition life and Muslim in Abyssinia are subjected to constant violence.

None of these historical massacres prepared Somalis for the current organized violence and mayhem in Hadame, Nagele, Babili, Ma’eso, and western Hararge. Mounting evidence suggests that the Oromo regional government did nothing to stop the organized violence. On the contrary, it encouraged through enumerable organized violence through its mass media as well as through inflammatory speeches by the regional President Lemma Megersa. OPDO is a member of the ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and feels a sense of impunity vis-à-vis Somalis.

According to a reporter for Aigaforum.com, “The recent killing of innocent Ethio-Somalis in Oromia region has touched nerves with many Ethiopians!” Tamrat Yemane and other journalists were invited to visit the area affected by the recent killings. What they witnessed as narrated here by Aigaforum.com reporter is “R-rated,” and requires parental discretion. Here is a brief depiction of some of what had taken place:

“People were being first identified through their language or other factors. Once determined that they were Somalis, then their properties were taken; their houses burned, and as a final blow, they were beheaded. Some victims were buried alive; pregnant women have been forced to



abort babies with blood dripping from their private parts! Men have been beheaded with machetes. Within hours, entire families perished.”

Who are the perpetrators of such heinous crimes? According to a federal police report prepared for the Federal National Security Council, organized violence against Somalis is committed by “Qeerro,” or “young men” of Oromia. In Oromo’s traditional governance system, called “Gada,” “Qeerro” is an age set male group in their prime years that is entrusted to wage war on behalf of Oromia interest. “Qeerro,” or “warrior male cohort” could be venomous and ferocious when commissioned by their superiors. “Qeerro” is to Oromo culture what Cossack vigilante is to the Russians. In both Oromia region as well as in contemporary Russia, ultranationalists in both instances have commissioned these vigilante groups. Put in a different way, the crimes the “Qeerro” committed against innocent Somali civilians are not much different than Alshabab’s indiscriminate killings of civilians.

The central government of Ethiopia has so far failed at best to protect Somali civilians and at worst turned a blind eye. Meanwhile, Oromo leaders embarked on a campaign of propaganda trying to advance false narratives and whitewash what could be crimes against humanity. Oromo officials tried to shift the blame from “Qeerro” to “Liyu police” (Somali regional peace keepers). As of today, though, there is not a shred of evidence that connects Liyu police (Somali regional police) to any mayhem against Oromos. On the contrary, violence committed by “Qeerro” against Amharas, Sidama, and particularly Somalis, are well documented.

In fact, EPRDF officials ignored the plea of Somali civilians, Somali elders, as well as the Somali regional government (DDSI) to intervene and help Somali civilians before any of this took place. Somali elders in particular spoke with the Prime Minister months ahead before the organized violence took place, and warned him of Oromia’s intention vis-à-vis Somalis. All pleas from the Somali side were ignored.

Why did the EPRDF failed to Protect Somalis?

There are three theories as to why the central government did not do anything, or was reluctant to avert the 2017 organized violence committed against Somali civilians:

Theory one: Those who politically oppose the ruling EPRDF argue that this organized violence acts were orchestrated by the central government. Proponents of this theory would like us to believe that the central government is pitting Oromos against Somalis in order to dissuade Oromos from challenging the center. Groups like Ginbot-7, Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and a small group of Somalis who have disagreements with DDSI, and are ready to deal with the devil subscribe to this unlikely theory.

This theory does not hold any water beyond the hype and hysteria of conspiratorial theory. Simply put, this theory is not based on evidence and remains improbable to explain the organized violence carried by “Qeerro.”

Theory Two: This theory assumes that the country is going through a period of crisis where the center is weak and the Oromo region is flexing its muscle. In the last few years, OPDO seems to have moved to a direction of creating an independent Oromia.

This reorientation of its stance has brought it closer to or merged it with the moribund and outlawed Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and other ultranationalist groups. In essence, the narrowing gap between Oromo groups, hence their combined effort to find ways to create an independent Oromia country, is a serious challenge to Addis Ababa.

Two main factors that precipitated the merging of ultranationalists and pro-independent Oromo groups to openly defy the center: First is the age-old demand of Oromos seeking their own state in the Horn of Africa - the notion of creating an independent Oromia national state, whose territory has yet to be demarcated. Some believe that even if Oromos get the premiership position of the country, they will not be satisfied for their long-term goals since the early 1970s is to establish their own state in the Horn of Africa. In some documents, Oromo ultranationalists claim their future nation state, when achieved, would include most of Jigjiga zone, the port of Zaila, and even most of Guban region of Somalia.



One iteration of pan-Oromo map

The second culprit for the crisis often generated in the Oromia region is a misplaced reaction to growth inducing economic policies which the central government promotes without regard to the welfare of Oromo farmers. Proponents of this theory claim that ethnic-based federalism did not benefit them both in political or economic terms. The recent Master plan for Addis Ababa plus aggressive commercialization of agricultural land are often cited by the proponents of this theory as the triggers for revolt. However, neither Oromo political ambitions nor recent grievances against Addis Ababa explains organized violence Oromos carried against their brethren Somalis.

Theory Three: The third theory says that the 2017 organized violence carried by Oromos is the result of a flare up of Oromo anger; Oromos are made to believe that a large part of Somali region belongs to them. Oromos' claim of Somali territories started in the 1980s following massive displacement of Somalis by the Mengistu dictator. Subsequently, in 1992 a unified OLF and OPDO mounted an armed attack inside Jigjiga. They ambushed the Headquarter of the Somali administration in Jigjiga. That political and military ambush continues unabated.

OPDO's prominent position in the EPRDF coalition gives the Oromo side undue impunity against Somalis. As a matter of fact, this theory maintains that EPRDF is prepared to reward OPDO (a) by foregoing any punishment pertaining to the organized violence, and (2) by rewarding it with bigger and better prizes as long as OPDO does not abandon its membership in the EPRDF coalition. This bigger and better prizes could mean to cede to Oromia all of Fafan and parts of Jigjiga zone.

Simply put, Somalis are dispensable and Oromos are not. The organized violence carried against Somalis can only be explained within the dictates of real-politick. EPRDF needs OPDO and would do anything for it to keep that organization as part of its coalition. As far as crimes against Somalis are concerned, it a case study where the criminal (OPDO) and the judge (EPRDF) are one and the same.

Despite a progressive constitution to which Somalis contributed immensely, the country's real power remained in the hands of cadres representing EPRDF members. If you are not a member of this coalition, your rights within the reformed empire is rationed by Addis Ababa. As far as Somalis are concerned, EPRDF has thus far reneged on its promise to implement Article 39, and respect for the rights of the Somali region has been eroded.

Remarkably, Somalis are so far clean and are observing law and order. The nine Somalis identified in the criminal investigation is nothing more than a red-herring to appease OPDO, and make as if both sides participated in the conflict. About 97 Oromo perpetrators are identified thus far.

There has never been two sides to the conflict; on the contrary, Oromos viciously attacked and killed thousands of Somali civilians, often while federal troops watched them being annihilated. There is enough evidence in the hands of federal policy to indict and put in prison all the 97 Oromo criminals so far identified

On the contrary, forget biased propaganda, most of it coming from Addis Ababa-based pseudo-journalists, there is not a shred of evidence that connects Somali region to any premeditated criminal acts against Oromos. That is why not a single Oromo civilian was killed in Jijjiga, Tuli, Togwajale, Dagahbur, and beyond.

Even the Liyu police in the region was told not to lift a finger against Oromo “Qeerro,” denying them the right to defend their civilians. This is indeed historic and a double standard sponsored by Addis Ababa. The current organized violence against Somalis must narrow differences between Somalis groups.

Where to go from here?

The following recommendations may avert future crises between Somalis and the more aggressive Oromia region, if only Addis Ababa takes the following measure sooner than later:

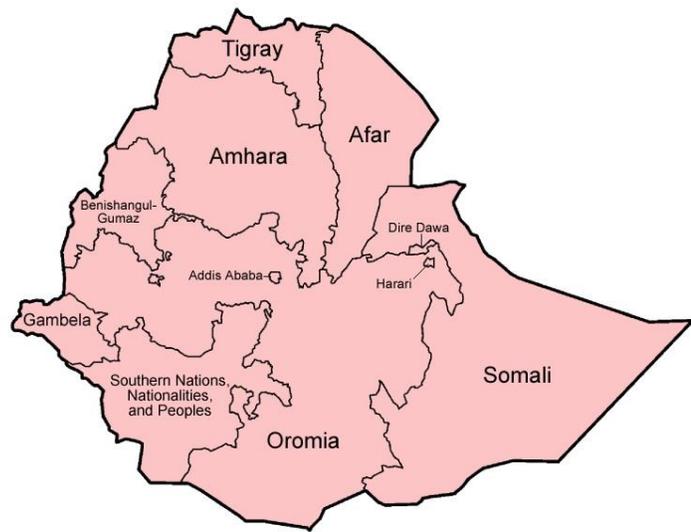
1. Implement the true spirit of Article 39 and let each and every regional state exercise its right to self-determination. Herman Cohen, former Undersecretary for Africa Affairs and the architect of power transfer from the Dergi to TPLF following the London talks in 1991, even opined similar recommendations. He chastised the EPRDF leadership for distorting the spirit of the constitution. Equal autonomy exercised by all the 9 regions per the constitution could bring a power equilibrium, especially between Oromo and Somali regions. The current imbalance where OPDO is a member of the ruling coalition creates a condition similar to the Orwellian “Animal Farm,” where some regions are more equal than others. That must change by any means necessary.
2. Mediate between Oromos and other groups, particularly with Somalis, and seek Oromo leadership to fully assume the responsibility of the organized violence committed by “Qeerro” and start mending relationship afresh with Somalis on equal footings. Also, EPRDF must stop Oromo expansionist policy. This would require OPDO shouldering the responsibility of what had happened and take positive steps to remedy the conflict, including vacating its outlandish claim on Somali territory. Let the Somalis assert themselves and start protecting their civilians.

3. Re-evaluate how Oromia leaders misused Article 39. While OPDO leadership rightly took advantage of the rights provided in federalism, they totally negated other articles that affirm respect for human rights, observance of law and order, respect for neighboring nationalities and more. Suspending Article 39, which is a favored scenario by those who oppose federalism, could only lead to a total collapse of the center. The only way out of this crisis is to fully and practically implement Article 39 in an equitable manner. That would also require to cease the extra-power given to the four members of the EPRDF coalition.

Concluding Remarks

The roots cause of the current crisis in Ethiopia, which culminated in an organized violence against Somali civilians, is lack of clear policies pertaining to Article 39 and the rights of “nations and nationalities.” EPRD has erroneously created its own Orwellian “Animal Farm,” where members of its coalition are more equal than others. It is this exclusive membership afforded to OPDO that emboldened it to carry out what would go into the history books as the “2017 organized violence against Somalis.”

Whereas OPDO is disproportionately empowered, Somalis have been losing ground fast since 1994; Somalis lost significant swaths of their districts due to weak leadership in the past; they have been pushed out of Nagele; key cities like Janacsani and Babile have been robbed by force. Somalis’ districts in Ma’eso have been illegally ceded to Oromia. Also, as many as 8 districts comprising of 480 villages and settlements (Kabeles) all of which are inhabited by Somalis have been illegally transferred to Oromia.



The 2004 sham plebiscite which sought to demarcate boundaries between Somalis and Oromos ended up giving 80% of the contested districts to Oromia; and that did not satisfy OPDO leaders. Many Somalis compare the 2004 so-called plebiscite to the 1967 six-day of Israeli-Arab war. At the war's end, Israel ended up controlling the Gaza Strip, the West Bank (including East Jerusalem, Shebaa farms), the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights. EPRDF's deliberate partiality has a far-reaching impact and may further destabilize DDSI and the entire region.

Mr. Haile Mariam Desalaighn, Ethiopia's embattled Prime Minister, is faced with serious political challenges. The most salient challenge is whether he can balance the rights afforded to the nine regions in the federation. Neither the current system of Orwellian inequality nor the statuesque which refuses to devolve power to the regions is sustainable.

The hitherto history of the Empire has been the history of struggle for equality of nations and nationalities; democratization of the country also hinges on this aspect of the political history of the Empire. It is therefore inescapable to fully implement Article 39 and equalize the powers and status of all the nine regional governments. Either dismantle EPRDF, or open up the doors for all! That is the inescapable reality facing Addis Ababa. An Orwellian “Animal Farm” political structure is rather a prescription for the collapse of the center. The PM office also needs to find a credible way to bring all “Qeerro” activities under control, while bringing to justices all involved in this vigilante enterprise.

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