

Reflections on the Saga of the Somali Question

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ONLF as a Political Commodity

In a recent interview with [the Ethiopian TV, English Program](#), Dr. Abdiweli Ali Gaas, President of Puntland state of Somalia, uncharacteristically painted the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) with a negative broad brush and banded it with the terrorist group of Al-Shabab. However, in fairness I contacted President Gaas on this matter. He responded to me in writing by saying this: “It was a slip of the tongue and I will try to rectify it as soon as possible.” I completely accept that explanation and encourage Dr. Gaas to act on his promise as soon as possible. The President’s rectification may even be a lesson in the future for others to rectify in public when they err in their judgment.

Prior to Dr. Gaas, former President Farool of Puntland in an extrajudicial way apprehended suspected [ONLF “sympathizers”](#) and handed them over to Ethiopia; in the era of the rule of war lords in Mogadishu, hundreds of innocent civilians, including pious elders and businessmen, were passed on to Ethiopia in exchange for arms shipments. In 1996, the late President Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal of Somaliland also apprehended and gave innocent civilians over to Ethiopia. The same was done both by Presidents Riyale and Ahmed Silanyo.

The culture of ONLF bashing by post-civil war Somali politicians, and the political commodification of the name “ONLF” speaks more to the demise of Somalia and the vision for being Somali or “Soomalinimo” than to what ONLF’s politics represents. In the larger geopolitical scheme of the Horn of Africa, the meek position often exhibited by post-civil war Somalia is an ostensible reflection of the weakening, if not disappearing, sovereignty of the once proud and progressive Somalia.



In the political landscape of the Horn of Africa, where Somalia is reduced to a disheveled quasi-trusteeship country, both regional and national leaders bow down to the modern rulers in the land of the Lion of Judah (Libaaxi Rer-beni Isreal), the protector of the Christian faith in the East, where Portugal had clashed with Turkey in the 16th century in search for the mythical Prester John. (Once Portuguese convinced themselves that they had found him in Ethiopia, the protection of that state by the west became the unwritten diplomatic language of the

subsequent eras.)I

"Photo- *Preste*" as the Emperor of Ethiopia, enthroned on a map of East Africa in an atlas prepared by the Portuguese for Queen Mary, 1558, British Library)."

The late Samuel Huntington, in his seminal book, "The Clashes of Civilizations," locates the source of the cultural clash between the East (Muslim) and the West (Christian-European) in this early and un-abating Ethio-Somali conflict.

Given this history, that spans through centuries, and subsequent Ethiopian strategic goals towards its junior and weaker neighbor, many ordinary Somali citizens view Addis Ababa's "Gibi" palace (home to both emperors Menelik and Haile Selassie) as the modern version of Somalia's newly acquired Westminster house; Westminster is the old colonial house in London where Africa's fate, a fate with painful legacy, was planned and accordingly dictated. In the same token, post-civil war Somalia's fate seems to be decided at Addis Ababa's "Gibi."

Owing to the repercussions that followed the long period of statelessness, Somali politicians invariably see their giant neighbor as a power to reckon with; no politician in Somalia in his/her right mind ((Mogadishu, Jubbaland, Puntland, and Somaliland), goes contemporary political logic, would dream of to be on the wrong side of Ethiopia's political calculations. Each one of Somalia's competing parts that have yet to come under one federal system sees Ethiopia as an asset whose alliance offers incalculable political mileages – that is political mileage for one Somali against another Somali. Whether said Faustian calculation on the part of Somali politicians at the expense of the greater good leads to an irreversible erosion of the sovereignty of Somalia and the meaning of "Soomaalinimo" remains to be seen.

In assessing the similarity or lack thereof between ONLF and Al-shabab, one has to evaluate the long trajectory of struggle by Somalis in Ethiopia. Instead of mounting localized criticism on who is right and who is not, I rather take a different route in this essay – shed some light on the historical and political challenges faced by Somalis and make a cursory review of where ONLF is situated in the genuine struggle waged by Somalis, without minimizing its shortcomings.

In passing, Saied Samatar, an astute student of Somali history and anthropology, once wrote a scathing assessment of the Somali National Movement (SNM) under a catchy title, "The SNM Gantlet," (Gaashaankii SNM). After savage attack was mounted against him by those who did not agree with his assessment of the movement, he confided in me that such attacks by his Somali critics often provoke and incentivize his penmanship to rather critically write on what are otherwise mundane issues.

Banding ONLF not with Al-shabab but with TPLF

Is ONLF similar to Al-shabab? To be unequivocal about my unqualified answer to this question, I like to borrow one of Black America's slang: ONLF "ain't no Al-shabab." In other words, ONLF is not Al-shabab.

Rather, ONLF and Al-shabab are more dissimilar than they are similar. Al-shabab is, in contemporary political lexicon, an “Islamic fundamentalist” group; ONLF is a self-admitting secular freedom fighter within a portion of the geography of the Somali region administered by Ethiopia. ONLF’s tactics of war are those of revolutionaries, attacking in a “hit-and-run” against military garrisons in strategic locations, whereas Al-shabab relies on suicidal bombings of innocent civilians to no end. Al-shabab’s ideology is a global Jihad, but ONLF is managing an incomplete, yet evolving 30- year-old political program that invokes politics of resistance for a delineated geography – the Somali region.



Contrary to what one hears from Addis Ababa, ONLF has more commonality with the coveted Tigrigna Peoples Liberation Front lead (TPLF) led by the late Meles Zenawi than with Al-shabab led by Ahmed Godane. If the TPLF is the modern reincarnation of the 1940s Wayane resistance, a people’s resistance to the imperial rule of Haile Selassie, and later on to that of Megistu’s Dergi, ONLF is a close kin to the now defunct Western Somalis Liberation Front (WSLF) that has roots in the uprisings of the 1940s and 1960s in Jigjiga, Dhagahbuur and beyond. Its current opposition to the rule of EPRDF should be viewed with the same prism looked at the struggle of the TPLF.

Ideological differences notwithstanding, both TPLF and ONLF claim to fight for the aspirations of their respective oppressed peoples. Whereas the Dergi called TPLF Wayane terrorists, and the Dergi called WSLF “Somali sargo gab,” or “Petro-dollar mercenaries,” EPRDF wants all Somalis including those in the republic to label ONLF as the new terrorist on the block. That would have been a fair game only if Dasaliegna Haile Mariam, current Prime Minister of Ethiopia, would rewrite Ethiopian history and declare TPLF as a terrorist organization in the same breath he labels ONLF. As the saying goes, what is good for the goose is also good for the gander. The two have similar histories except that one is today a victor and the other has yet to convince its own people of the rightness of its tactics.

Both fronts wish to liken their political/historical experiences to other struggles waged by the EPLF in Eritrea, the ANC in pre-Apartheid South Africa, FERELIMO of Mozambique and others. Both would like to view their fronts as the institutional tools to express the aspiration of their voiceless people, no matter how crude their methods of doing so are. But at the same time, all these movements have grave short comings, some more serious than others.

ONLF has its own organizational challenges. Following is a partial list of challenges that face it, especially in an era when Ethiopia’s influence in the Somali peninsula rules supreme. Unlike TPLF, EPLF or even WSLF, the leadership of ONLF has yet to advance an inclusive vision to guide its struggle. Although it has been successful in mobilizing some sectors of the Diaspora, a large proportion of the Somalis from that region have yet to join its cause.

In addition, the sectarian name, which ONLF sticks to like a *religion*, will always remain a strategic weakness and a point where the other side easily pokes at and attacks it. For reasons that are obvious, one may think it is in the interest of ONLF long term strategy to *deliberate* the simple question of what is in the name of “ONLF,” especially in the lineage-based Somali context.

Another timely strategic issue facing ONLF is what Tobias Haggmann calls “talking piece” (Haggmann, 2014) with its counter parts. If and when this is done, of course ONLF should not walk away from its stated political goals, but give internationally supervised talks with Ethiopia a chance.

Having appraised ONLF, the challenge facing Somali leaders lies in recognizing the dual nature of political movements such as ONLF. Whereas ONLF may have tangible short comings in realizing her goals visa-vi contemporary realpolitik in the region, the question it invokes – the right of the “Ogaden people to self-determination” is timeless. That is a supreme cause. How does one not condemn the victim, the one who is seeking self-determination from oppressive regimes, but politically engage Ethiopia is where character and vision of Somalia’s post-civil war leadership is needed.

A great lesson in this regard was offered by none other than the moral leader of this century – the late Nelson Mandela. Remember how Nelson Mandela refused to listen to the US and stood alongside with PLO and Castro on their respective aspirations for their people, without denying where they are not right?

There are legitimate issues one can raise about ONLF tactics. But the inherent organizational weakness of ONLF should not lead its critics to band it with terror groups. With the help of an article that I wrote on the struggle of the Somalis in the region for the Ethiopian Review, Dr. Ed. Keller of UCLA was able to convince the African Subcommittee of the US congress that ONLF not be designated as a terror group. Since then, the US government maintained a policy that *ONLF IS NOT* a terrorist organization; US government and EU countries recognize it as a legitimate force to talk to. Several US congressional members regularly receive ONLF leaders in Washington. Moreover, amnesty international and other Western NGOs also openly engage it on various fronts. The least one can do is to treat ONLF like the Irish Republican Army (IRA) – recognize the cause as greater than the political organ.

All this is to suggest to post-civil war Somali politicians that history should not always be written by the victor. Ethiopia still has a long way to go to settle the Somali question – probably a question that amounts to Ethiopia what the Palestinian question is to Israel.

Understanding the Political narrative of the Somalis

Looking back, the correct approach to the Somali question in Ethiopia was vigorously debated in the 1970s by the youth of Jigjig. In a way, from historical point of view, ONLF today sits on the past failures of its predecessors, a political landscape where no coherent ideology other than passion-based nationalism in liberating Somali region in Ethiopia was employed.²

The vexing question of when Somalis under Ethiopia will democratically and freely rule, or rather govern, themselves, a question pondered by many colleagues, invokes a debate that is both contemporary and a thing in the past. In addressing this question, one needs to consider three intertwined challenges faced by Somalis in the region:

1. A primitive feudal-colonial rule that lived beyond what the prominent left-leaning British Africanist, Basil Davidson, called "Africa's decolonization" era of the 1960s is at the crux of the question. In other words, Ethiopian colonial polity still stands as the unenviable lone state of all the participants of the 1884 Berlin conference, aka the Scramble for Africa; Ethiopia fortunately or unfortunately still hangs to the colonial subject and its share of the spoils it acquired from that era.

Ethiopia first acquired parts of the Somali region at the conclusion of that conference and consolidated its full colonization at the end of World War II. Most of the Somali inhabited region was rewarded to Ethiopia by Great Britain for the former's participation in the War on the allied forces' side. Ironically, Western powers both in the past as well as today remained reluctant to criticize Ethiopia, thus exempting it from critical scrutiny.

2. Lack of political maturity and a vanguard class to lead the struggle has always been a challenge- this challenge is common to the clan-based and pre-feudal Somali society that occupies a big swath of the Horn of Africa region. The Somalis in Ethiopia, despite multiple revolts throughout history, consistently failed to develop a coherent and sustainable leadership drawn from a solid middle class with a forward-looking ideology. All the resistances against Ethiopia have so far been instantaneous and sporadic.

3. Ethiopia's lack of democratic rule and its longstanding policy to use the Somali region as a militarized buffer zone, thus historically subjecting the residents to political manipulations and excessive intimidations associated with such a Machiavellian attitude, kept Somalis under servitude akin to colonial Africa. Because of these conditions, there has not been strong middle class to lead a revolutionary struggle that has broader national agenda.

In order to undo their bondage, the Somalis have always debated over two strategic approaches:

1. Carry a war for liberation through an armed struggle. To that end, an unplanned armed resistance, open revolt if you will, that almost defeated Ethiopian army took place in Jigjiga between 1948 and 1957; following was the 1963 Geesh revolt lead by the late charismatic Garad Makhtal Dahir; in 1977 the heavily armed Western Somali Liberation Front, massively assisted

by the then powerful army of the Somali Democratic Republic, almost liberated all the territories inhabited by Somalis. The baton of previous armed struggles by the region's people has arguably been assumed by the ONLF since 1984, of course through, what some critics see, a sectarian nomenclature.

2. Participate in the evolving pan-Ethiopian state (itoniawinet) and partake in the ongoing "democratization" process. State building in Ethiopia has yet to incorporate the Somali periphery region (Markakis, 2013) with the exception of several successive cosmetic and unimpressive reforms. For example, after the 1963 Geesh revolt, the region was granted what is termed "astatadar" or administering yourself. Such was a political program akin to Britain's colonial strategy of ruling natives through coopted elders (balabats in Amharic). At the wake of the Dergi rule, a half-hearted system of self-rule that created two autonomous regions – Issa and Gurgura region in the west, and Eastern Harar deliberately avoiding the Somali name - was instituted in the region. Under the current Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front's ethnic federalism, dominated by TPLF and its Oromo ally, Somalis are granted a nominal regional autonomy with the Somali name well pronounced – Somali National State of Ethiopia, or Dawlad Deegaanka Ismaamulka Soomaalida (DDIS). Critics of the current decentralization contest that unlike other regions, the Somali region is highly manipulated and interfered in its local affairs willy-nilly by Addis Ababa, thus rendering the region unstable.

Concluding Remarks

The armed struggle alternative of the Somalis in Ethiopia comes and goes in various forms since 1948. With all its imperfections, the war for liberation still goes on. If nothing else, the undying choice of armed struggle by some in the region, no matter who assumes the leadership and despite its variant manifestations, still represents profound unmet political needs/rights of the Somalis in the region.

It is also inescapable to recognize that the peaceful struggle of the Somali people to gain real political/economic rights and representations, albeit with limited success, is proving to be a serious alternative towards self-rule, owing to the gradual but steady implementation of ethnic based federalism. If any group in Ethiopia pays its undivided attention to the dispensation of the spirit of Article 39 of the Ethiopian Federal Constitution – the right of nations and nationalities to self-determination including and up to secession - Somalis come first. Ethiopia can't continue to manipulate the provisions of this Article without provoking action soon or later from the Somalis. Realizing freedom for the Somalis is a monumental challenge and an intergenerational task that has yet to develop and employ a vanguard class to accentuate that dream.

As Ethiopian population hits the mark of one hundred million (100 million by 2020), what type of political struggle, armed or peaceful participation in the Ethiopian polity, continues to be debated. What is not debatable is that the next wave of political change in Ethiopia will usher in the Somali region either a complete independence from Ethiopia or a genuine democratic regional autonomy where the interference of Addis Ababa is completely curtailed.

As Ethiopia's erstwhile radical student leader in the late 1960s, Tilahun Gizaw, piqued Haile Selassie's feudal court, and to the chagrin of its current chauvinists, that there will always be "the Somali question in Ethiopia however much one does not like it." The Somali question indeed will continue to be the 21st century political challenge to Addis Ababa.

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Note:

1. *Between the 12th through the 17th centuries, the legends of **Prester John** (also **Presbyter Johannes**) were popular in Europe. It was about a Christian king said to rule in a Christian nation that was lost amidst the Muslim and pagans in the East (Ethiopia).*
2. *(I will be sharing the history of this subject with you soon in part 3 and 4 on the series of "the Rise and fall of a Revolutionary Generation). In that discussion, I will reminisce how the TPLF struggle succeeded, while the Somali failed, partly as a result of manipulation by the Barre regime.*