

# and Regional Autonomy: The Somali Test<sup>1</sup>

---

Abdi Ismail Samatar

One of the biggest obstacles to Ethiopia benefiting from the EPRDF's devolutionary policies does not lie, as the government's actions seem to suggest, with Amhara chauvinists wanting to resurrect a past ethnic hegemony which is surely buried, but with the Front's contumacious implementation of the policy, and its effort to control virtually every facet of the political process.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1990s in Africa, two sharply contrasting models of state-society relations and the role of ethnicity in national affairs have emerged.<sup>3</sup> The first is the unitary dispensation that rejects the ethnic classification of its citizens while cognizant of the ill effects of a race and ethnic-based apartheid order. The African National Congress (ANC) and its allies in South Africa opted for a strategy they thought would ensure the country's political and administrative restructuring but would not perpetuate sectarian ethnic identity at the expense of citizenship.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the post-apartheid regional administrative structure and boundaries are not based on ethnicity. Further, the populations in these regions elect their provincial councils, and have gained some degree of fiscal autonomy, although South Africa remains a unitary state. A key manifestation of the system's competitiveness is the fact that opposition parties have governed two of the wealthiest and most populous regions for most of the past decade and the ANC has been unable to dislodge them until the most recent election in 2004.<sup>5</sup> Although the ANC won the most votes in Kwa Zulu-Natal and the Western Cape, it lacks a majority in these provincial councils to unilaterally form regional administrations. This openness of the political process has

made possible a significant degree of regional autonomy in a unitary system.

The second model is Ethiopia's ethnically based federal order. This model anchors citizenship in the soil of ethnic belonging. Advocates of this framework claimed that dividing the country into ethnic regions would recognize the country's primordial reality and bring past injustice to a rapid end:

Sometimes, people in Africa feel that they can wish away ethnic difference. Experience in Rwanda has taught us this is not the case. Experience in Liberia has taught us that this is not the case. What we are trying to do in Ethiopia is to recognize that ethnic differences are part of life in Africa, and try to deal with them in a rational manner. Rather than hide the fact that we have ethnic difference, we are saying people should express it freely. That, I think, pre-empts the type of implosion we've had in Rwanda.<sup>6</sup>

The intent of the Ethiopian approach has been to give greater autonomy to ethnic communities to manage their affairs.<sup>7</sup> The country's constitution sanctions decentralized and autonomous regional administrations; however, political praxis has been at odds with these principles.

Ethiopia's ethnic regions generate continuing controversy regarding their long-term effects on the country's integrity. At one extreme, some predict that the centrifugal dynamics of Ethiopia's exclusive sub-national identities will lead to the country's disintegration, particularly since the new constitution guarantees the right to self-determination up to secession. Proponents of this thesis cite the former Soviet Union as a model of what happens when central government is weakened in previously authoritarian and ethnically divided societies.<sup>8</sup> Second, supporters of the ethnically based dispensation note that the new federalism is a novel departure for Ethiopia that cannot be reversed despite teething problems.<sup>9</sup> Third, other critics claim that the dominant party at the center has reneged on its democratic promise by illegally subverting free ethnic political mobilization.<sup>10</sup>

All three claims have some merit. An implosion of the federal system could become a reality if national leaders and regional authorities are unable to produce a legitimate political and economic system that matches the aspirations of different communities. It is also the case that the new order has introduced the limited freedoms that most Ethiopians already enjoy. Finally, evidence suggests that those in power in

Addis Ababa harass ethnic organizations in the regions that have centrist, democratic, or independence agendas.<sup>11</sup>

Other important aspects of the debate indicate that the dominant political party and economic practice will determine the viability of ethnic federalism.<sup>12</sup> The preeminent party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and its affiliate, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), have a strategic role in determining the longevity, character, and vitality of a federated Ethiopia. The governing party's accomplishments are portrayed in one of two ways. Some describe the TPLF as liberating and democratizing.<sup>13</sup> Others paint a picture of a conniving, but ultimately Tigray-dominated system.<sup>14</sup> These studies rarely examine the internal dynamics of ethnic regions to assess the actual balance of power between the center and the regions. Two of the few such attempts are Markakis' sketchy research note and Khalief and Martin's decidedly uncritical presentation of the Somali case.<sup>15</sup>

Drawing on material from the Somali Region, this article posits that the post-1991 dispensation opened new opportunities initially, but that the governing party's manipulation of internal regional politics derailed the promise of an autonomous and legitimate local administration that could remedy past ailments. The TPLF/EPRDF's capacity to manage regional authorities depends on the quality and legitimacy of local leadership and the political coherence of provincial communities. Thus, the best prospect for autonomous regions within the Ethiopian federation lies in a collaboration between regional leadership that is accountable to local people and a national authority that balances its interests with those of the federation. Conversely, the prospects for viable and autonomous regions dim when the regime at the center is domineering and the regional authority is ill equipped.

This essay examines the political dynamics generated by Ethiopia's division into ethnic regions. Specifically, it demonstrates that the central government's attempts to tightly control regional political processes undermine the essence of regional self-rule that the federal constitution mandates. Making the situation more precarious, inept regional elites waste opportunities to enhance regional autonomy. The evidence has been gathered from the Somali Region (Region 5) since 1995 and mainly consists of individual and group interviews. The names of all the sources are withheld to ensure their personal safety. Each source is numbered in the text.<sup>16</sup>

The rest of the article consists of three parts. Part one sketches the forces involved in the initiation of Ethiopia's new federal system. It underscores the weakness of regional parties that were *invited* to the national conference that produced the federal structure. The determination and ability of the TPLF to ignore many of the demands of major regional parties, such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), created a strong perception from the start that regional authorities served at the pleasure of the dominant party. The second section assesses political developments in Region 5 since the collapse of the old regime. It briefly summarizes the history of the region's liberation struggle and its relations with the Somali Republic, and highlights how the Somali military government (1969–91) subjugated the population's desire for liberation to its own agenda. The military regime's domination of the liberation movement undermined the capacity of the local population to craft a coherent regional project. This analysis is followed by an examination of the establishment of the Somali Region in 1991 and of the role federal authorities played in determining which Somali party led the regional administration. Initially, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF)<sup>17</sup> became the only regional party openly opposed to the federal agenda to direct a new administration. However, the rule of the ONLF did not endure and the Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL) replaced it in the 1995 regional election. At this point, the Somali Region had the most competitive regional elections in Ethiopia. Despite this exceptional democratic transfer of power, the federal authorities "indirectly" appointed the region's president, and the new ruling party made important changes in the way the region was administered. The federal authorities exploited internal party conflict and abruptly terminated the party's tenure. Furthermore, the federal authorities not only forced a merger of the two Somali parties and created a new one but their representatives moreover managed and directed the "congress" that established the new party. In the process, they "helped" appoint the new regional president. The imposed unification of the two Somali parties terminated spirited electoral competition in the region. These developments brought political practice in the region into line with the rest of the country. The final section reflects upon the consequences of fractious and inept local leadership and excessive federal intervention for regional autonomy and local democracy.

## II. Regional Authority and the New Federation

The TPLF's decision to use ethnicity as way to mobilize first the Tigray population,<sup>18</sup> and second, other nationalities, against the brutal military regime was an expedient and strategic decision, particularly given the Amhara colonization of the state. Having defeated the military oligarchy in its home territory by 1988, TPLF realized that it could not march to the national capital and impose a Tigray regime in place of the Amhara. Consequently, it formed the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which included junior partners from Amhara, Oromo, and other national groups. Many EPRDF members, particularly the Oromos (from the Oromo People's Democratic Organization or OPDP) were prisoners of war in the TPLF camps. Once it captured the capital in 1991, the TPLF-led EPRDF convened a national conference. Those invited to the conference belonged to ethnically based movements, some of which had only recently formed.<sup>19</sup> The EPRDF's most important new ally was the independent and popular OLF, representing the largest ethnic group. Despite the collage of ethnic participants in the conference, the military victors clearly controlled the conference's agenda.<sup>20</sup> However, the collaboration of autonomous groups, such as the OLF, enhanced EPRDF's credibility. The conference produced a national charter that laid the groundwork for the to-be-constituted Ethiopian federation. The transitional government that was then formed marched to EPRDF's tune, with the TPLF as its political and military leader.

The first major rift between the EPRDF and the autonomous national liberation movement, the OLF, became public in 1992.<sup>21</sup> The OLF claimed that EPRDF troops harassed and intimidated its people, and the dominant party's refusal to postpone the 1992 election led the OLF to renounce the coalition.<sup>22</sup> The OLF alleged that the election was rigged in favor of the dominant party and its supplicant Oromo ally, the OPDO.<sup>23</sup> The OLF withdrew from the transitional government. Shortly thereafter, the Tigray (TPLF) troops humiliated the OLF by capturing 20,000 of its soldiers in their camp. The defeat of the OLF signaled that the victor was not going to be detracted from turning its agenda into the national program. Many informed people viewed the electoral "victory" of the EPRDF/OPDO in Oromia in 1992 and the harassment and persecution of the OLF as a bad omen for the constitutionally sanctioned federalism anchored in autonomous regions.<sup>24</sup>

The departure of the OLF meant the removal of the largest and most popular party from the political scene. Political organizations that were junior partners in the EPRDF coalition came to power in most of the country after the 1992 regional elections. The Somali Region was an exception, since the ONLF formed the first regional authority. The ONLF was neither a member of the EPRDF coalition nor an ally of the ruling party. This party refused to participate in the dialogue that produced the transitional charter. Instead, it advocated the immediate secession of the Somali Region from Ethiopia. This party remained in power for a brief period. The Somali People's Democratic League (SPDL), a friend of the EPRDF, replaced it in 1995. The League was, in turn, displaced by the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP) in 1998. A narrative of the political history of the Somali Region since 1991 shows the relative roles of ethnic political parties and the ruling party in Ethiopian federalism.

### **III. Politics in Somali Ethiopia since 1991**

Analysts often point to the TPLF's organizational and leadership skills and its cadres' discipline as a national asset.<sup>25</sup> The future role of other ethnically based parties in the evolution of the Ethiopian polity requires an assessment of the quality of these parties and their legitimacy. Establishing an ethnic federation acceptable to the various groups will require representative parties from all communities to broker the necessary political and economic compromises. In an ideal world, ethnic equals will come together to create a federation on a mutual basis. But Ethiopia is not an ideal context. As an ethnic liberation movement with national leadership ambitions that defeated the old regime, the TPLF resolved to remake Ethiopia under its tutelage. If other ethnic liberation movements had significantly helped defeat the military dictatorship, then the nature of the post-Derg dispensation might not have been so lopsided. The TPLF movement introduced a democratically promising element into Ethiopia's political milieu. However, those militarily weak movements that had democratic aspirations were faced with a stark choice: stay in the game, within circumscribed limits, and try to push the democratic agenda from within or retreat to the bush and engage in a liberation war. The immediate choice made by significant elements of the Somali community to play by the TPLF rules was the wise one. The alternative that ONLF advocated would have been

catastrophic, as it would have thrust an unprepared Somali population into war with Ethiopia's new regime.

### **A. Liberation Politics in Somali Ethiopia**

A brief explanation of the history of the Somali Ethiopian Liberation movement will shed light on the limiting conditions the Somali community has faced in the post-1991 period. The first organized liberation movement in the Somali territory under Ethiopian jurisdiction, the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), came into existence a few years after Somalia gained its independence in 1960.<sup>26</sup> The Somali Republic's Constitution sanctioned liberation of Somali territories in Ethiopia, Kenya, and French Somaliland. This essentially embedded these liberation movements in inter-state relations and, more centrally, in Somali regime politics. The liberation movement in Somali Ethiopia reached its zenith in 1977–78, when the military government in Mogadishu committed its forces to "assist" the struggle. The liberation movement had no autonomy from the Somali national army in this effort. Nonetheless, the Somali Ethiopian population supported the war despite the stranglehold. Somali successes were temporary once the Soviet, Cuban, and Yemeni contingents intervened and helped Ethiopian troops beat the Somali army. This defeat was catastrophic for Somalia and the liberation movement. In Somalia an armed political power struggle among the elite ensued, culminating in the state's collapse and in the country's disintegration in 1991.

During the interim period, 1978–91, the liberation movement lost its autonomy because the Somali military regime used the liberation movement for its own purposes, as many movement leaders became henchmen of the new order. Those who disagreed with the tactics of the regime were forced to flee the country; the unlucky individuals rotted in jail. This treatment caused the movement to lose its grass-roots identity and become a sycophant of the military rulers.<sup>27</sup> The collapse of the state and the subsequent fragmentation of Somali society into warlord territories, along with the rise of sectarian politics, had dire effects on Somali Ethiopian politics. Although Somalis contributed significantly to the weakening of the Mengistu regime, the liberation movement was politically and militarily a spent force in 1991. Many Somali Ethiopians who had moved to Somalia since the early 1960s returned to Ethiopia after May 1991. Some of these were senior military leaders and political entrepreneurs, steeped in sectarian elite games.

## B. Chaotic Transition: Disorganized Elite and Federal Interventions

The viability of an autonomous Somali Region in the new federation depended on the interplay between a fractured Somali elite and TPLF forces. This section demonstrates how disorganized Somali leadership created opportunities for federal authorities to determine which party ruled the region. The willingness of federal authorities to intercede in local affairs signaled the problematic nature of “regional autonomy” in Ethiopia. Regional autonomy should mean that local people are free to choose representatives that are accountable to them.

Most Somalis everywhere rejoiced over the collapse of the Mengistu government, particularly since former Somali regimes had supported the TPLF. But some Somali Ethiopians had expectations contrary to the designs of the TPLF. As TPLF troops gained control of the country, the ONLF warned that Tigray troops should not cross into Somali territory. The ONLF threatened war in the Somali territory if its warning was not heeded. Young men representing the ONLF came to Addis Ababa, and the Sudanese government began to mediate an agreement between the ONLF and the EPRDF. The ONLF representatives refused to adopt EPRDF’s political scheme. Once EPRDF leaders understood their position, it began to search for other Somali groups. The EPRDF announced that people could form their own political parties. Before long, the names of a dozen political parties appeared, supposedly representing various opinions. In the absence of an authentic liberation movement representing the Somali community, the EPRDF sent for the remnants of the WSLF, languishing in Mogadishu. These individuals were brought to Addis Ababa. The EPRDF proceeded with its agenda and allocated four seats in the national conference to Somali groups,<sup>28</sup> except for the ONLF. The WSLF leaders, who received two seats, wanted Somali representatives in the national conference to be inclusive of all Somali groups; consequently, they decided to give one of their seats to the ONLF.<sup>29</sup>

From the first encounter between the Somalis and the EPRDF, three things became apparent. First, the EPRDF *unilaterally* decided how many national conference representatives each participating ethnic group would have. These allocations were based on estimates of the relative sizes of different population groups in the country. Second, the EPRDF decided which Somalis would participate in the conference. The ONLF’s initial exclusion from the participant list implied that ethnic communities might not be free to choose their representatives.



Third, the Somali Region was going to suffer from social fragmentation in the absence of a disciplined, institutionalized, and rooted liberation movement. The 1992 regional parliamentary election did not change the political landscape. There were simply no organized and established political parties that could compete with one another on the basis of a political program. From the 37 Somali constituencies, 111 individuals were elected. The ONLF, as a nominal political party, claimed the largest number of representatives. The newly elected representatives attended a seminar in Dire Dawa, the presumed capital of the Somali Region, organized by the transitional government. According to numerous informants, Somali deputies paid scant attention to the conference proceedings but concentrated on lobbying for posts in Ethiopia's first Somali regional government.

By counting all people of Ogadeni genealogical origin as the party's "natural members," the ONLF wrongly assumed it had a sufficient majority in the assembly to form the new government. Unfortunately for the ONLF, many elected officials of Ogadeni descent did not belong to this party nor share its clanist agenda. The WSLF had the second largest group of elected members in the regional parliament. As the parliament proceeded to elect government officials from its ranks, active campaigning began for the executive committee posts: regional president, vice-president, and secretary. Abdillahi Mohamed Saadi organized his 33 genealogical groups within ONLF and gained their support for his candidacy for president. Since Saadi was not the ONLF's official presidential candidate, his candidacy exposed the party's lack of internal coherence, discipline, and election procedures.

Meanwhile, other groups in the regional parliament were becoming alarmed by the ONLF's claim of being the majority party. Also concerned about the ONLF's sectarian agenda (excluding all Somali groups except those of Ogadeni descent) and internal turmoil, these other groups began to rally around an agenda inclusive of all Somali groups. They nominated Sh. Abdi Nasir, an Ogadeni who strongly supported an inclusive political agenda, for the presidency of the region. Professor Abdillahi and Eid Dahir were their candidates for vice president and secretary. Those nominated for the nineteen openings for the Executive Committee of Parliament also represented a broad cross-section of the population. This inclusive approach forced the ONLF to accept Saadi's presidential candidacy rather than risk a split within its ranks and thus the chance to control the regional government.

At this point, the inclusive Somali group suspected that the ONLF was communicating with EPRDF authorities in Addis Ababa.<sup>30</sup> They believed that the ONLF complained to the EPRDF authorities that about eleven members of the regional parliament, who did not have their approval and represented areas in which Somalis and Oromos were competing for office, were participants in the deliberations. For whatever reason, the EPRDF government intervened in local parliamentary matters and expelled eleven members from the regional parliament. These changes sealed the ONLF's victory in forming the government, and Saadi was elected regional president.

The next major items on the parliament's agenda were the region's official name, its flag, and the formal designation of Somali Ethiopia's capital city. The two most contentious agenda items were the identification of the capital city and the region's name. The ONLF strongly argued for adopting "Ogaden" as the region's name. This motion was defeated, and the name "Somali Region" won approval. Once the debate on the selection of the regional capital began, the ONLF leaders brought another faxed message from the federal authorities instructing the Somali parliament to choose a town other than Dire Dawa, since the Oromos also claim Dire Dawa as their city. The ONLF supported the EPRDF's position and proposed Godey, a small and remote town in the far reaches of the region, as the capital. An emergency meeting was called to consider Godey. This proposal was approved by the central authorities, to the chagrin of most non-ONLF Somalis. Despite these problems, this foundational meeting held in Dire Dawa resulted in the first major Somali *public celebration* in Ethiopian history.<sup>31</sup>

The newly elected Somali leaders went to Addis Ababa to be introduced to Ethiopia's transitional government. They met then-President Zenawi, Prime Minister Layne, and the Somali Minister in the central government, Abdimajid Hussein.<sup>32</sup> The transitional government granted the Somali leaders a budget of six million Birr to finance their immediate agenda. The three Somali leaders remained in Addis Ababa despite the enormous and urgent duty of forming a functional regional and local administration. The ONLF administration took another four months to appoint regional departmental heads and district administrators. Such a lackadaisical attitude among its leaders boded ill for the region's viability. Two events illustrate this point. First, rather than seeking professional advice about how to form a viable regional administration, they merely copied the structure of the central government. The only posts left out were uniquely federal departments, such as

Foreign Affairs and Defense. Second, the three senior leaders and some members of the parliament's executive committee divided the six million Birr among themselves to spend in the following ways. The president and the secretary purchased vehicles with some of the money. The vice-president allocated some money for use in areas in which Somalis and Oromos were competing for office. When the executive committee members complained about being left out of the spoils, they were given a share of the funds to purchase chairs and tables. These actions were taken without parliamentary approval and without recording the expenses.<sup>33</sup>

This inappropriate managerial approach displeased some executive committee members, who complained to the federal authorities. They were told to convene their parliament and sort out their differences with the regional administration. The group heeded this advice, returned to Godey, and requested an urgent meeting of parliament. Meanwhile, some ONLF members were disgusted with what they perceived as systemic corruption in the regional government and called for its dismissal.

Parliament was called into session. The first agenda item was to formulate operational rules and local laws. While debating these matters, disgruntled ONLF members intensified their demand for a change of government. Given the threat to his post from within the party's ranks, Saadi, the regional president, believed that non-ONLF parliamentarians were his allies. After all, they were not calling for his removal from office. In the meantime, a group of MPs, mostly from the Jigjiga zone, organized themselves as a parliamentary bloc (15 members) and pushed a collective "Jigjiga agenda." The Jigjiga bloc agreed to nominate their members to official posts based on merit. The group's cohesion made it into a powerful alliance within parliament whose support others sought.<sup>34</sup>

In an attempt to bring down the government, thirteen appalled executive committee members resigned as a group. This precipitate action created an immediate crisis. Other executive committee members urged parliament to replace those who resigned. At this point, the speaker of the national assembly, Dawit Johannes, and a Somali member of the assembly, Abdulaziz Ahmed, came to Godey. They told the regional president that he could not stay in power legally after the resignation of thirteen executive committee members. They urged parliament to re-elect or replace the members who had resigned.<sup>35</sup>

A new campaign for executive branch posts ensued. The ONLF abandoned its former office bearers and nominated Abdirashid Ahmed as president, Professor Abdillahi as vice-president, and Abdi Illah as secretary. Other members of parliament formed a grouping called the United Zones (UZ) and nominated Hassan Gire, Abdi Illah, and Eid Dahir for the three posts. The latter group, whose core members were from the Jigjiga zone, negotiated with Abdi Illah's kinsmen and offered them the vice presidency. The two parties agreed on this. However, this covenant fell apart as Abdi Illah reneged and attacked Eid as unfit for the secretary's post. The UZ group withdrew from the agreement. A new executive committee was elected, much to the ONLF's chagrin. In September 1993, the committee elected the UZ group ticket to form the new government.<sup>36</sup>

The newly elected president and his associates went to Addis Ababa to meet the federal authorities. Apparently, the ONLF cadre asked the new non-ONLF—but Ogadeni—president and his deputy to claim to be ONLF to boost the “Ogaden” cause. The president did this in a national radio interview. The secretary, Eid Dahir, contradicted him on the same radio program. Despite the president's radio announcement, the ONLF cadre and loyalists harassed the new government in Godey.

President Hassan Jireh's team began to appoint new administrators for various posts. In a short period they appointed 77 directors of offices, a number that exceeded the sum of the federal government's offices. The regime proceeded to appoint 261 teachers for every zone in the Somali Region.<sup>37</sup> It was simply following a central government directive indicating that this number of teachers *could* be hired per zone. The trouble with the Somali regime's approach was that hardly any of its zones, with the exception of Jigjiga and maybe two other places, had enough schools to absorb this many teachers. The starkest example of this misuse of regional resources was the deployment of 261 teachers to the Fiiq zone, an area with only one elementary school, which could use about six teachers.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, Jigjiga—with 53 schools, including the only senior secondary school in the Somali Region—received the same number of teachers. Furthermore, most of the newly employed teachers did not have the necessary training and qualifications; others were phantoms.

The ONLF was unhappy about being excluded from partaking in the spoils and called for a parliamentary meeting in early 1994. The UZ group supported this proposition, but asked that the meeting be held in Jigjiga. The ONLF did not like the change of venue but agreed to it

as long as its key concern, formal debate over regional self-determination, appeared on the agenda. The UZ realized that it could not resist the inclusion of this item in the debate, as that would have handed the ONLF a major propaganda victory. Moreover, the UZ added a point on the agenda that would free regional and federal authorities to fight Itihaad, the militant Muslim group. Most UZ members suspected that the ONLF and Itihaad were connected. Parliament meekly discussed the Itihaad item and then approved it with overwhelming support. Next the meeting turned its attention to self-determination.<sup>39</sup> The delegates agreed to form a parliamentary committee to negotiate with the federal authorities the terms of divorce. Most regional MPs had not read the federal interim constitution and the procedures governing regional self-determination. The few who had read it led the advocates of self-determination into a political confrontation with federal authorities by convincing them to form this committee.

The intense emotional nature of the parliamentary debate on self-determination sidetracked ONLF deputies from trying to bring down the non-ONLF regional government. The sense of victory felt by supporters of immediate self-determination was short-lived, for the committee never went to Addis Ababa to negotiate with the federal authorities. However, when the federal authorities learned about the Somali parliament's decision to pursue self-determination, they immediately demanded that the parliamentary executive committee call an urgent meeting of parliament to inform members of the illegality of their act and to reverse it. The meeting was called, although many ONLF members refused to attend. The president left for Addis Ababa after giving his blessing to the meeting. Afterwards, key ONLF members convinced the president that, if the parliamentary meeting continued, it would do great harm to their interests. The president faxed a message to the executive committee, telling them that their meeting was illegal.<sup>40</sup> Furious about the president's acts, the committee decided to fire him. They also accepted his deputy's resignation when he quit in protest at the meeting.

The federal authorities intervened in regional political affairs for a second time. The prime minister's office changed its view on the ONLF as the major party in the region. As parliament began to elect the third regional government, the federal authorities reversed their earlier decision to expel MPs from the areas that were contested by Oromos and Somalis. The induction of these individuals into parliament enabled the UZ group to elect Ugas Abdirahman and Ahmed Makahiil as president

and vice president, with Eid Dahir as secretary. The UZ group elected Abdirahman as president in late 1994, because the group thought he shared their inclusive political agenda. The new government decided to temporarily transfer the capital city to Jigjiga. President Abdirahman and his deputies journeyed to Addis Ababa to become acquainted with the federal authorities. The president was interviewed on national radio and asked about the transfer of the capital from Godey to Jigjiga. He denied that this had occurred, but others contradicted him. The Somali federal minister, Hussein, met the president, the secretary, and one influential executive committee member. A heated debate ensued between the president and the other two. The secretary and the other executive committee member, with encouragement from the federal minister, impressed on the president that the federal authorities were contemplating dividing the Somali Region into at least two provinces because of internal political acrimony. The president was startled by this news and immediately told his colleagues that the discussion should come to an end.<sup>41</sup> In the meantime, the federal prime minister went to Godey to explain to Somali elders the self-determination process as articulated in the constitution.

The agreement between the federal minister and the regional president and his deputies to work together for the common good did not prevent the president from pushing a sectarian political agenda once he returned to Godey.<sup>42</sup> Ugas Abdirahman, encouraged by eleven executive committee members, resisted the official transfer of the capital to Jigjiga. Moreover, he tried to halt the national census being conducted in the region. This last act infuriated the federal authorities, who asked the executive committee to come to Addis Ababa for consultations. Prime Minister Zenawi inquired why the Somali Region was not making progress. Ugas Abdirahman responded that the region's troubles were the result of interference from people in the federal prime minister's office. Other committee members disagreed. The prime minister warned the committee that the federal government might have no choice but to convene a meeting of elders in the region and inform them that their elected officials were not working on their behalf.<sup>43</sup> He explained that the elders could then decide to fire them all. Premier Zenawi warned them that they had one last chance to reform and to act responsibly.

The executive committee returned to Jigjiga, fired the entire region's senior employees, and began drawing up job descriptions and qualification for future employees.<sup>44</sup> They also dismissed the president in

early 1995, when he refused to carry out the decision to transfer the capital to Jigjiga. (The capital was subsequently moved to Jigjiga.) Political instability characterized the Somali Region during this early period of transition in Ethiopia. The principal factors responsible for this condition were poor Somali leadership and the absence of disciplined political organizations that could hold leaders accountable. A secondary source of turbulence was federal interventions during which some members of the regional parliament were expelled and then reinstated to favor a particular political outcome.

#### **IV. A Glimpse of Democracy and Regional Autonomy**

The 1995 election marked a new beginning for the Somali Region. A better-organized political party with a broader popular base defeated the ONLF. The Somali Region became the only province in the country in which a governing party was defeated but retained a significant number of seats in the regional parliament. Meanwhile, the federal leaders tacitly informed the new Somali party who its regional president should be. This constituted a major federal intervention that would seriously corrode regional autonomy. Despite electoral success, internal squabbles induced a major political crisis in 1997. This section examines these developments.

As the political struggles noted in the previous section unfolded, another Somali political movement was slowly gaining ground. A handful of Somalis in Addis Ababa, who were disturbed by the clanist thrust of Somali political parties, gathered in 1991 to forge a more inclusive Somali organization. They convened a dinner with the blessing of the two Somali vice ministers in the federal government, Abdi Adan and Shamsudiin Ahmed. However, their attempt at political union fizzled away because of the ONLF's refusal to compromise.<sup>45</sup>

In April 1992 some members of the group reconvened and formed the Committee of the Whole, with twelve members, each representing a political constituency. They elected three committee officers: Suliman Ahmed, Abdulaziz Ahmed, and Hassan Fayanbiro, as president, vice president, and secretary, respectively. The 1992 regional elections were held before the Committee of the Whole made further progress as a political party.

The elections marked another setback for the formation of a united Somali political coalition. After many meetings and deliberations, these groups assembled on 12 February 1994 at the unused military

facility in Hurso, on the rail line 26 kilometers west of Dire Dawa. The purpose was to form one political party, and participants agreed on a broadly representative system reflective of the proportions of various groups in the Somali population. The 1,500 delegates who assembled in Hurso affirmed the working group's decisions. Among the many decisions endorsed were the party's name, the Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL), and party colors. The organizing committee also nominated Hussein, the federal Somali Minister, as the party's chairman.<sup>46</sup> Although Hussein was not a key organizing committee member, the delegates unanimously approved the recommendation. They also elected Vice Minister Shamshudiin Ahmed as Secretary of the party for similar reasons.

The new party had little time or resources to prepare for the 1995 national and regional elections. It sent a delegation to the Republic of Djibouti to solicit financial support from Somali Ethiopians and other Somalis. The group was well received and raised over \$30,000 and obtained several vehicles. The League confronted the ONLF in the elections and won nearly two-thirds of the seats in the regional council and all seats in the federal chamber. *This competition between these Somali parties—with contrasting political programs—meant that the Somali Region had the most competitive and “democratic” elections in the new ethnic federation.* The League then formed its central committee. According to the League's founding principles, each major Somali group was to be represented by one person in the central committee.<sup>47</sup> The first act of the new regional parliament was to elect the 21 executive members.

The committee proceeded to elect a president, vice president, secretary, and regional bureau heads. Before the party chose its candidates for these offices, it became apparent that the federal government *preferred* some candidates over others. The League's vice chairman, evidently trying to curry favor with Dawit Johannes, a senior federal officer, showed the latter a list of individuals who would be the region's new leaders. Johannes informed the vice-chairman that the responsibility for selecting regional government heads rested with the parliament. However, federal authorities continued to favor particular individuals.<sup>48</sup> This marked the third major federal intervention in the Somali Region's local political affairs.

Hussein traveled to Jigjiga to participate in the formation of the new regional government. He called Eid Dahir and Ali Abdi for consultation<sup>49</sup> and told them about the “advice” he had received from the federal authorities regarding who should be the region's president and



vice president. President Zenawi preferred Eid Dahir and Ali Abdi to lead the government. However, since Ali Abdi had been elected to the federal parliament, he could not become vice president.<sup>50</sup> Hussein was concerned about the federal authorities' favored list because Eid and the minister belonged to the same genealogical group. He was deeply worried about the negative political impact Eid's appointment would have on the party and its inclusive agenda. Ali Abdi urged Hussein to support Eid for the presidency, given his relatively superior performance as secretary in previous governments. The League's executive committee felt compelled to accede to the federal authorities' "recommendations." Eid Dahir and Abdillahi Mohamed were elected president and vice president. Ahmed Makahiil, who had formerly been acting president, refused to transfer authority to the newly elected officers and was arrested and later sentenced to seven years in prison.

A party with a more coherent political agenda began to govern the region for the first time, and the constant intensive internal competition for posts that marked previous regional government diminished noticeably. The party's unity enabled the executive committee to put into place regional administrative regulations and submit them for parliamentary approval. The parliament and the government were acting as partners in the region's rehabilitation. With technical advice from the prime minister's office, League authorities began to present annual recurring and capital budgets to the federal government.<sup>51</sup> As the regional administration became more systematic and accountable, the budget allocation began to increase. Unfortunately, given the region's limited absorptive capacity, a large portion of these funds was unused and reverted to the federal treasury. As the region's capacity to utilize the budget grew, federal advisers, who had the power to make final decisions, made it difficult for the region to spend budgeted funds.<sup>52</sup>

The League government also strove to insure that political appointments to regional bureaus were inclusive of all Somali groups. In addition, a categorical decision was made to make all professional appointments on merit. The first major sign that the League government was serious about professionalizing its administrative and technical cadre was the mass re-examination of schoolteachers. Teachers who wanted to keep their jobs were asked to submit original copies of their certificates and take a re-qualification examination in 1996. Unqualified teachers and those who failed the examination were fired. More-

over, all the phantom teachers disappeared from the payroll. Cleaning up the rest of the region's public services proceeded at a slower pace.

The League administration enjoyed a degree of legitimacy in the region, except in the areas where ONLF members or Itihaad held sway. The government made some progress in its development program. For example, new water wells were drilled in the more arid parts of the region. Likewise, a teacher training college and a nurses' training school were established in Jigjiga. Despite these tangible government accomplishments, the public remained concerned about the dominance of the TPLF military in the region and its excessive influence.<sup>53</sup> Some government members noted that part of this influence resulted from the impotence of some senior regional administrators.<sup>54</sup> Most individuals had two conflicting views about federal influence. First, they approved of the military presence because it prevented the spread of the Somali civil war into Region 5. Many noted that if the ONLF had come to power without a federal military presence, its agenda would have forced most Somalis to resist its clanist rule. Second, the majority of public officials and the general citizenry felt that the EPRDF's interventions in local politics and regional administration undermined local development (except when Somalis sought such assistance). The vast majority of those interviewed thought that the federal authorities could remove any regional government from power if the latter digressed from the EPRDF's agenda.<sup>55</sup>

In spite of these limitations, the League government had a relatively long lifespan—two years—in contrast to its predecessors. The public thought that the regional government enjoyed EPRDF support, although the League had not formally joined the EPRDF political umbrella. However, the public's perception was not accurate, as events in the summer of 1997 revealed. Serious differences existed between the regional president and many of the party's executive committee members, which gradually undermined the League's unity. Observers agree that the president failed to delegate authority to his regional ministers.<sup>56</sup> The gulf between the president and senior party colleagues was exposed in 1997 when the League initiated a dialogue with the ONLF to explore the prospects of the two parties uniting. Participants in this discussion and others noted that the president tried to subvert the conversation by acting in contradiction to what the two parties had agreed.<sup>57</sup> While the dialogue between the League and the ONLF was occurring, the EPRDF government had its own secret negotiations with the ONLF. The secret nature of the ONLF-EPRDF talks troubled

League members, who became convinced that the EPRDF had a different agenda than theirs.

The League president's management style and political behavior was reported to the party's chairman. The chairman informed the president of the party's concerns, but continued to support him. The tug-of-war between the president and the party's executive committee persisted. An incident in Jigjiga in autumn 1997 turned the conflict into a major political crisis. A guard of the regional police commissioner thrashed the director of a regional bureau. Many suspected the police commissioner of masterminding the incident since he was at odds with the victim. The president of the Somali Region failed to deal with the affair until public commotion compelled him to report the event to the executive committee. He tried to rush through his decision on the matter without enough discussion, and the executive committee refused to comply until further investigation was conducted. The president then left for the city of Harar.

The next day, fourteen executive committee members met. Informed of the gathering, the police commissioner sent a contingent of his force to surround the building where the meeting was held. The executive committee members discussed the president's authoritarian management style. They unanimously agreed, after lengthy deliberations, to remove him from office. Two committee members reported this decision to the League secretary, who was in Jigjiga. Immediately, the secretary informed the party's chairman, in Addis Ababa, of the events. The secretary told the chairman that the group of fourteen requested a meeting with him; the chairman gave the secretary the permission to hold one. After a meeting with sixteen central committee members, the secretary reported to the chairman that the group endorsed the president's removal from office, as it thought that its action would save the party and the government from more serious trouble. The chairman was not happy with this outcome and considered the group to be coup makers.<sup>58</sup>

The secretary returned to Addis Ababa and met the chairman. Hussein noted that the group of fourteen who had met in Jigjiga did not constitute a quorum; consequently, their decision was invalid. He immediately called a party meeting to undo the illegal decision. The party met in Jigjiga and, contrary to the chair's wishes, upheld the dismissal of the president. The party also censured the group of fourteen for not following party rules and recommended that parliament decide appropriate sanctions. This set the stage for a major political upheaval.

## V. Farewell to Democracy and Regional Autonomy

The party's decisions were not implemented, and the federal authorities and the party chairman began to talk publicly about the "coup" in the Somali Region. When parliament met, it confirmed the party's decision, despite the "illegal" presence of EPRDF representatives. EPRDF agents tried to intimidate MPs to change their minds but they remained resolute. Moreover, the deployment of a new contingent of federal troops in Jigjiga did not frighten members of parliament. Parliament refused to lift the fourteen MPs' parliamentary immunity against prosecution until a select committee had completed its investigation.<sup>59</sup> Of the fourteen MPs, one realized the EPRDF's strategy was to force parliament to withdraw their immunity so the federal authorities could put them behind bars. He spoke bluntly in parliament and then quietly slipped out of the country. The federal authorities organized a meeting for unelected Somali elders, hand-picked by the federal military, to undo the party's and parliament's decisions, but the elders declined to support the proposition. After much cajoling, parliament succumbed to the federal agents' wishes and the thirteen MPs were hauled into detention. They remained in police custody for two-and-a-half years. Finally, a local court convicted them, but they were released from prison immediately, having already served their term. The presiding judge was subsequently demoted for failing to give the prisoners a harsher sentence. The fate of this judge confirms that the judiciary is tightly controlled by the administration.<sup>60</sup>

The party's chairman, backed by the federal authorities, refused to heed the democratic wishes of members of the League and parliament. His actions plunged the League into a deep crisis. In defiance of the EPRDF's flagrant attempt to manipulate and intimidate members of parliament, the League unexpectedly decided to elect the ONLF's secretary as the chairman of parliament.

The disorder in the League gave the federal authorities the opportunity to remake the political landscape, by far the most intrusive federal intervention in the region's politics. Senior EPRDF cadres were assigned to manage the Somali Region's "reform." These officials organized two separate meetings—one for the League and the other for the ONLF.<sup>61</sup> Shortly thereafter, the federal authorities called for the creation of a supreme unification committee. The Deputy Prime Minister of Ethiopia, a key EPRDF member, gave clear instructions that

the ONLF would chair the supreme unity committee, and the League would occupy deputy-chairmanship.<sup>62</sup>

The EPRDF went ahead with its plan to unify the two parties.<sup>63</sup> Each party was told to go through self-criticism.<sup>64</sup> Senior EPRDF officials directed this process, a function legitimated when members were asked to raise their hand if they wanted EPRDF officials to participate. Given the presence of cadres, when this open vote was taken, many Somalis in Jigjiga told the author that people were scared to deviate from what the authorities wanted.<sup>65</sup> A contrived self-criticism involved party members admitting to misuse of regional resources.<sup>66</sup> The party's chairman was stunned by these admissions as the charade unfolded. Those who refused to admit wrongdoing or condemned the process were fired. The same process took place in the parallel ONLF meeting. The two parties were then asked to select nine League and eight ONLF members to a joint committee that would work on the merger of the two parties. Shortly thereafter, the central committees of the ONLF and the League met separately and selected 35 people from each party to represent them in the merger. The 70 ONLF/League members and 150 others brought in to take part in the convention met in Jigjiga in June 1998.<sup>67</sup> EPRDF officials openly managed these meetings. The highlight was the announcement of the formation of a new party, the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP). Neither the League nor the ONLF approved the formation of the new party. A faction of ONLF re-emerged as a renegade party and claimed that those of its members who had joined the new governing party were stooges of the federal authorities. By contrast, nearly all former League members who were not selected to join the new party were doomed to languish in the political wilderness.

The engineering of the new Somali party created unexpected circumstances at the federal level. The majority of Somali federal parliamentarians (MPs) and many former League members were excluded from the new party. Of the original 25 Somali federal MPs, three fled the country and sought political asylum. The chairman, who was the only Somali minister in the federal system, resigned and took a job with the United Nations in Geneva.<sup>68</sup> In addition, two MPs claimed to be neutral in the shifting political terrain, and three became members of the new party. Another was silent about his position. The remaining sixteen members constituted the only organized Somali political opposition to the EPRDF agenda.

The new party consists of a 25-member Central Committee and the nine executive members it elects. The executive committee elected the region's president, deputy president, and secretary.<sup>69</sup> Many senior regional government and party officials have attended the EPRDF's political education school (*Tatiq*) in Addis Ababa. Despite these attempts to "reform" the party, it remains crisis-ridden, as indicated by the struggles between the regional president, his deputy, and the party's executive committee in early 2002.<sup>70</sup> The federal authorities intervened in the struggle, and at one point *removed* the president from his post only to reinstate him two days later.<sup>71</sup> The conflict re-emerged in the summer of 2003 and the president was removed from office. This federal intervention reaffirms the public's claim that the Somali party has little or no real political autonomy from the EPRDF. Four reasons are cited for this claim.

First, senior ruling party officials managed and directed the process through which the Somali party was created. This is often contrasted with the absence of the EPRDF's significant strategic participation in the League's establishment. Moreover, the tactics used in abolishing the old Somali parties have scared current Somali political leaders and convinced them that they serve at the pleasure of the EPRDF bosses. They point to EPRDF's strategic use of unelected elders selected by the federal authorities to reverse parliament's decisions or to cajole that body into adopting the ruling party's agenda as proof of the blatant contravention of the regional and federal constitutions.

Second, EPRDF officials, known as regional advisors, openly participated in parliamentary deliberations at the highest decision-making level in the region, despite the claim that the advisors were serving at the regional leaders' discretion.<sup>72</sup> The notion that federal advisors are not decision makers may be theoretically valid. However, this is not how things worked in practice.<sup>73</sup> Numerous regional government officials and civil servants repeatedly told the author that the advisors had intervened in very detailed matters, although "they are not supposed to act in this manner."<sup>74</sup>

Third, the EPRDF has adroitly managed to frighten the regional leadership into submission. When the existing regional parties or individual leaders no longer serve the EPRDF's purpose, it destroys them. The regional government's bizarre behavior in soliciting funds from the public for the war effort in 1999–2000 underscores the subservience of Somali leaders. Regional authorities required each rural community to contribute a specified number of sheep to support Ethiopian troops

in the war with Eritrea. Village elders were responsible for collecting these "contributions." Several elders from five villages told me that they had no choice but to raise the desired number of sheep, even if the villagers resisted. They added that the regional government was making these onerous demands just when a severe and prolonged drought was devastating the livestock economy.<sup>75</sup> The conduct of regional authorities in this regard appears to support the proposition that they derived their authority from Addis Ababa and were only marginally accountable to the Somali population.

Fourth, an item in the SPDP's program stated that the 1977 Somali-Ethiopian war was an illegitimate and irridentist Somali attack.<sup>76</sup> Very few Somalis in the region agreed with this claim. The public surmised that this was EPRDF propoganda and claimed that not a single Somali had joined the Mengistu army to fight the Western Somali Liberation Front and the Somali army.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, they pointed out that a similar item condemning the TPLF's support for Eritrea's war of liberation should be inserted into the TPLF party program.

The EPRDF waited for the 2000 national elections to get rid of its critics. EPRDF and its client Somali party engaged in all kinds of political maneuvering to defeat the renegade candidates and to bring compliant MPs into the federal parliament.<sup>78</sup> The EPRDF beguiled elders in such a way that the opposition would have no chance to compete effectively in the election. There were only two instances in which the strategy failed. The SPDP nominated candidates for all constituencies. Community leaders in the two areas refused to endorse the candidates. Instead, they endorsed sitting MPs who were members of ESDL. The leaders of the two communities resisted the pressure since one of these two candidates had served his community well during the drought and famine, and had earned its respect and support. The second candidate stayed in touch with his constituency. The governing party realized it would loose in the two areas. Consequently, it decided to induct the candidates of the communities into the party without their consent. This about-face of the federal authorities and the SPDP shows that the only shield that elected regional officials have against federal intimidation is to maintain close ties with their constituencies. All other renegade candidates lost the election.<sup>79</sup> The victory resulted in amenable MPs, grateful to the federal authorities, assuming Somali parliamentary seats in Addis Ababa. The change signaled the end of an era in regional and Ethiopian politics and sealed the slight democratic aperture that had permitted a degree of regional autonomy.

Field observation and extensive interviews support the public's claims that the SPDP is the creation of the EPRDF. The SPDP's virtual collapse through internal political conflict over the region's population census and the list of candidates for the 2000 elections created the fleeting possibility for alternative parties to emerge.<sup>80</sup> However, none of the rival parties had the resources and EPRDF support to mount a credible challenge to the SPDP. Not a single independent or opposition candidate won a seat in the federal parliament. In addition, keen observers note that the federal authorities were dissatisfied with the regional president and orchestrated his replacement sometime before the election was held.<sup>81</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

A rationale for reorganizing Ethiopia's internal administrative division along ethnic lines was that it was designed to grant ethnic communities regional autonomy to manage local affairs in order to eliminate past injustices and enhance the state's legitimacy. This reasoning is rooted in three assumptions: (1) ethnicity *per se* is the main cause of conflicts; (2) ethnic communities are internally homogeneous and share a common political agenda; and (3) state inefficiency and illegitimacy are caused by the colonization of state institutions by certain ethnic groups. The first two assumptions are based on spurious evidence and confuse the consequences with the causes of civil strife.<sup>82</sup> The last assumption contains important elements of truth in some regions. The validity of the circumscribed third assumption means that we should carefully examine the nature of ethnic domination of a state and its consequences for political reform.

A case-by-case evaluation of the political history of particular counties or regions makes general statements about the links between ethnicity, political reform, and regional autonomy tenuous. For example, a unified ethnic *coalition* that defeats the "ethnic state" creates different *reform possibilities* than an ethnic liberation movement that topples the old ethnic state. In the first instance, if multiple ethnic groups have contributed to the struggle for liberation, it is impossible for one ethnic group to control the new national defense force, because all participants contributed to the downfall of the old order and thus jointly control different segments of the liberation army. Consequently, if no single group can claim that it has liberated the country, then no group has the unilateral right to set the reform agenda. In such cases, post-



reform restructuring may factor in ethnicity as an important variable in balancing regional and ethnic representation, but in ways that will not reproduce old patterns of domination or generate new ones. In contrast, if one ethnic group's liberation movement defeats the old regime, then other ethnic groups not represented in the liberation army may not have effective ways of keeping the new authority accountable.

The Ethiopian case is one in which a powerful ethnic liberation group (TPLF) decisively overthrew the old regime. This has had far-reaching implications for the balance of power between different ethnic groups in the reform era and for the nature of regional autonomy, as the Somali case shows. Four EPRDF acts give evidence of the severely limited degree of freedom of Somali parties and regional governments, and demonstrate the federal ruling party's pre-eminence. First, the selection of the Somali minister in the federal cabinet was the prerogative of the ruling party alone. This may have been appropriate during the transitional government of 1991–94, before regional and national elections had been held. Once Hussein resigned, however, the Prime Minister did not even consult Somali federal MPs when appointing his replacement.<sup>83</sup> Second, the authorities in Addis Ababa selected the first and only League president in the Somali Region. EPRDF leaders informed Hussein that they *preferred* Eid as the regional president. The federal authorities' practice of helping select Somali Region presidents has not changed. Current and previous presidents serve at the pleasure of the authorities in Addis Ababa.<sup>84</sup> Third, the intervention in the League's affairs, the establishment of the SPDP, and the EPRDF's use of non-elected elders to "discipline" the regional parliament to act "responsibly" makes a mockery of the federal constitution in word and spirit. Finally, the use of advisers in the regions undermines the elected regional leaders' authority. Consequently, the regional authority and institutions remain shells rather than *developing* into autonomous structures within the federation.

These four examples demonstrate that the TPLF and its umbrella political organization, the EPRDF, determined which Somali political party and leaders would govern the region. The Somali Region is not unique in this regard, as I discovered in my travels in several other ethnic regions, such as Oromia, Afar, and the Southern Nationalities Region. The repercussions of this centralization of political power are that the Somali population has little choice when electing a party and government to manage local affairs. The EPRDF has been able to sideline the Somali population's voice in the Somali Region because, since

the days of the struggle for liberation, the national army has mainly consisted of TPLF soldiers. Such an exclusion from the process has made Somali leaders susceptible to EPRDF pressure. This vulnerability, combined with the incompetence and opportunistic tendencies of many Somali political leaders, creates conditions in which these individuals vie for personal favors from the federal authorities. Further, many Somali regional and federal parliamentarians report that they fear for their lives if they disagree with federal leaders.<sup>85</sup> Five of the past seven Somali Region presidents (and many others) have served prison terms after they were forced out of office.

The evidence from the Somali Region confirms that Ethiopia consists of ethnic provinces that lack the local autonomy that the federal constitution enjoins. When local populations are prevented from electing their representatives, a consequential element of regional autonomy is lost. This system subverts the prospect of democratic and autonomous regional institutional development. The absence of legitimacy enhances the role of the security apparatus in maintaining the federation, and the defense machine is already devouring a major share of the country's meager resources.<sup>86</sup>

Nevertheless, Ethiopia's ethnic and decentralized political system, despite the EPRDF'S heavy-handed dominance, is undoubtedly an advance over the old regime. Ethnic communities enjoy some rights. For example, Somalis, who were not recognized as a community in the Ethiopian polity, have been acknowledged to be the fourth largest population group (some say the third) in the country since 1992.<sup>87</sup> The official admission of the existence of a Somali Region in Ethiopia contradicts old axioms that Somalis are not stakeholders in the Ethiopian state.<sup>88</sup> Other benefits include Somali as the regional official language and the medium of instruction in primary schools.

These vital gains are in peril as the regime tightens its control over regional affairs and thus resuscitates old hostilities. The only way to rehabilitate the spirit of the political changes of 1991 is for regional communities to gain the freedom to choose their leaders. This case study confirms that redrawing the country's administrative map to form ethnic regions cannot reform the ethnically based political injustices of the past. Legitimacy moored in local autonomy and democracy alone can seal the fate of the old order and secure a viable federation. Conversely, the perpetuation of current trends will deepen ethnic discord and could undo the federation.

Finally, it was imperative to tackle the identity question head-on, given the “ethnicization” of the state. Restoring the cultural and citizenship rights of the disenfranchised majority was essential for building an inclusive polity. Dividing Ethiopia into ethnic regions appeared to be a reasonable and appropriate vehicle for redressing past grievances while maintaining the unity of the country. However, the power imbalance between those who hold authority at the center and regional leaders/cultural communities undermined the promise of the new era. The evidence suggests that a different ethnic political order is being constituted that could create a new state hierarchy, potentially impeding the emergence of civic culture and accountable political order.

The broader implication of the Ethiopian case is that, unless there is a legitimate sharing of power, simply reorganizing a country’s administrative division along ethnic lines is not sufficient to neutralize the “ethnicity problem.” The challenge is how to undo previous disenfranchisement by enabling local communities to govern their affairs without creating another exclusive centralized authority. The election of 2005 has been more open than any other election in the country’s history and the opposition has garnered nearly a third of the parliamentary seats. Somalis in Region 5 have yet to cast their ballots because the federal authorities decided to postpone the election until September 2005. Nationally speaking, the election results provide an opportunity to revisit the promise of the early 1990s, celebrate cultural differences, acknowledge past ethnically based injustice without reifying ethnic politics. Pursuing the latter will deepen the wedge between communities and induce a new civil war, and it is, moreover, destined to fail.<sup>89</sup>

---

## Notes

1. I am grateful to the U.S. Fulbright Program for generously supporting this research. I also acknowledge the courtesy of various Ethiopian authorities in giving me permission to conduct the research. The aim of my original research was to study the establishment of regional development institutions. After three months in the field, I realized that little institutional development was taking place given the glaring absence of regional autonomy and the Somali leaders’ ineptitude and malfeasance. Consequently, I refocused my attention on matters pertaining to regional autonomy. A slightly different version of this essay was published in *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 6 (2004): 1131–1154. Permission for republication was granted.

2. J. Young, “Regionalism and Democracy in Ethiopia,” *Third World Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1998): 191–204 (author’s emphasis).

3. For a sophisticated analysis of ethnicity and citizenship in Africa, see M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

4. V. Maphai, "A Season for Sharing Power," *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 1 (1996): 67–81. For detailed discussion of the restructuring of the state in South Africa, see S. Oldfield, "State Restructuring and Urban Transformation in South Africa: A Negotiation of Race, Place and Poverty," unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Minnesota, 2000.
5. Opposition parties also have significant representation in provincial councils in ANC-governed regions.
6. Meles Zenawi, quoted in Steven P. Tucker, "Ethiopia in Transition, 1991–98," mimeo, 1998, p. 23. Zenawi's misreading of the Rwandan catastrophe shows the superficiality of his party's understanding of social conditions in the country and beyond. For a contrasting reading of Rwanda, see M. Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).
7. E. Keller, "The Ethnogenesis of Oromo Nation and its Implications for Politics in Ethiopia," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 33, no. 4 (1995): 621–634.
8. For a more detailed discussion, see Tucker, "Ethiopia." See also M. Ottaway, *Democratization and Ethnic Nationalism: African and Eastern European Experiences* (Washington, D.C.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); and Ottaway, "The Ethiopian Transition: Democratization or New Authoritarianism?," *Northeast African Studies* 2, no. 3 (1995): 67–84.
9. P. Henze, "Is Ethiopia Democratic? A Political Success Story," *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 4 (1998): 40–54; and Young, "Regionalism and Democracy in Ethiopia."
10. L. Lata, *The Ethiopian State at the Cross Roads: Decolonization and Democratization or Disintegration* (Lawrence: Red Sea Press, 1999).
11. S. Pausewang et al., *Ethiopia since the Derg: A Decade of Pretensions and Performance* (London: Zed, 2002). For a discussion of the authoritarian rule of the ruling party, see J. Harbeson, "Is Ethiopia Democratic? A Bureaucratic Authoritarian Regime," *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 4 (1998): 62–69.
12. Young, "Regionalism and Democracy in Ethiopia;" and K. Mengisteab, "New Approaches to State Building in Africa: The Case of Ethiopia's Ethnic-based Federalism," *African Studies Review* 40, no. 3 (1997): 111–132. See also Mengisteab, "Ethiopia: State Building or Imperial Revival?," in *The African State: Reconsiderations*, edited by A. I. Samatar and A. Samatar (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002), pp. 177–190.
13. Henze, "Is Ethiopia Democratic?"
14. R. Joseph, "Oldspeak vs. Newspeak," *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 4 (1998): 55–61; and Harbeson, "Is Ethiopia Democratic?"
15. J. Markakis, "The Somali in Ethiopia," *Review of African Political Economy* 70 (1996): 567–570; and M. Khalief and M. Doornbos, "The Somali Region in Ethiopia: A Neglected Human Rights Tragedy," *Review of African Political Economy* 91 (2002): 73–94. This piece provides a brief but general survey of the Somali experience in Ethiopia. Despite its usefulness, two issues weaken its argument. First, the Somali authorities in the region since 1992 are portrayed as victims, ignoring available evidence of the malfeasance and opportunistic dealings of many. Second, the authors expose their biased agenda by writing as if all Somalis in the region are members of the Ogaden genealogical group. For instance, the authors talk about the responsibility of Ogadeni intellectuals "to persist in searching for the kind of accommodation and political solution that will serve the interest of the region and its people" (p. 91).

16. The author formally interviewed 125 citizens in five communities and had conversations with a multitude of others between 1995 and 2002.
17. The ONLF was an informally organized party and came into existence in the late 1980s. The word "Ogaden" is the name of one of the Somali genealogical groups that inhabit the region. Somalis from other genealogical groups maintained a distance from the ONLF because of its clanist agenda and identity.
18. J. Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975–1991* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
19. The TPLF leaders could invite whomever they wished. This gave them tremendous power over who represented various communities.
20. Harbeson, "Is Ethiopia Democratic?"
21. P. Gilkes, *Ethnic and Political Movements in Ethiopia and Somalia* (London: Save the Children Fund, 1995); and Ottaway, "The Ethiopian Transition."
22. Lata, *The Ethiopian State at the Crossroads*.
23. Others have confirmed the dominant party's manipulation of the election. S. Pausewang, *The 1994 Election and Democracy in Ethiopia* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of Human Rights, 1994).
24. Subsequent analyses have sustained this claim. See Pausewang et al., *Ethiopia since the Derg*.
25. Young, "Regionalism and Democracy in Ethiopia."
26. The modern resistance dates back to the early days of the 20th century. See Sh. Abdi, *Divine Madness* (London: Zed, 1991); Said S. Samatar, *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Sayyid Mohamed Abdille Hassan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and D. Collins, *A Tear for Somalia* (London: Jarrolds, 1960), chap. 11. The focus of this chapter is Somali resistance to Ethiopian rule and ambitions. Collins's writing smacks of a mixture of racism and sexism.
27. In fact, stalwarts of the Somali liberation movement claim that, in the last decade of the struggle, the Eritrean and Tigray movements received more support from the Somali government than they did.
28. The EPRDF retained 32 of the 87 seats in the Council of Representatives. The OLF was given the next largest bloc, thus ensuring EPRDF domination of the conference. See Tucker, *Ethiopia in Transition*, p. 11.
29. Note the fragmentation of the political elite—mirroring that in Somalia—and how EPRDF encouraged this trend by distributing the seats among them along clan lines.
30. Seven different sources, including ONLF members, confirmed this. Interviews 1–4, in Jigjiga, Dire Dawa, and Addis Ababa, 1995, 1996.
31. Interview 2, in Dire Dawa, 1996.
32. Abdimajid Hussein passed away in April 2004.
33. Interview 3, in Jigjiga, 1996.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Interviews 3 and 4, in Jigjiga and Addis Ababa, 1996.
37. Interview 5, in Jigjiga, 1997.

38. Ibid.
39. This MP underscored that the Somali Region did not even have a police force or other security services. He, therefore, was afraid that, without the existence of a federal system of security, the region might be plunged into a civil war.
40. Group Interview 1, in Dire Dawa, 1997.
41. Group Interview 2, in Addis Ababa, 1997.
42. Interview 6, in Jigjiga and Addis Ababa, 1997.
43. Interview 7, in Jigjiga, 1998. The federal military selects the elders from various *Qabelehs* (neighborhoods) without consulting residents. The government pays these elders, who are therefore dependent on it.
44. Interview 5, in Jigjiga, 1997. An agent of the prime minister's office took part in these deliberations.
45. Group Interview 3, in Addis Ababa, 1995.
46. Interview 8, in Addis Ababa, 1996; also Group Interview 2. Hussein was appointed to the ministerial post because he was close to the TPLF leaders. Many Somali MPs suggested that Hussein's close association with the TPLF became a liability for Somalis. They felt that the TPLF leaders used him to micromanage Somali affairs.
47. This was not strictly adhered to, as one group received six spots, while two other groups each had two appointments.
48. Group Interview 4, in Addis Ababa, 1996.
49. Group Interview 5, in Jigjiga, 1997.
50. Ali Abdi was one of the key candidates the federal authorities tried to unseat in the 2000 election. He lost his seat in the federal parliament. Eid Dahir was removed from the presidency and served nearly a year in prison, but was later released. The author visited Dahir several times during his internment.
51. For a discussion of fiscal reform in Ethiopia, see E. Keller, "Ethnic Federalism, Fiscal Reform, Development and Democracy in Ethiopia," *African Journal of Political Science* 7, no. 1 (2002): 21–50.
52. Group Interview 6, in Jigjiga, 1998.
53. Interviews 8 and 9, in Jigjiga, 1997.
54. Interview 10, in Jigjiga, 1998.
55. Interviews 11 and 12, in Jigjiga, 1997, 1999. This had been the case five times in previous years.
56. Interviews 13, 14 and 16, in Jigjiga and Addis Ababa, 1996, 1997, 1998.
57. Group Interview 7, in Jigjiga, 1998. Those ONLF and League members interviewed confirmed this.
58. A contingent of the local police force was sent to the area between Harar and Jigjiga to wait for the president's return. This force fired on a vehicle containing senior federal military officers who were accompanying the president. The military rounded up the police, and no one was injured.
59. Interview 17, in Jigjiga, 2000; and Interview 7, in Jigjiga, 1998.
60. Pausewang et al., *Ethiopia since the Derg*, p. 253.

61. League and ONLF members who attended these meetings state that the two parties had lost whatever autonomy they had enjoyed until then.

62. The Deputy Prime Minister's declaration exposed the EPRDF's intention of creating ethnic parties that were accountable to them and not to local constituencies.

63. Federal authorities told the League that it should form a joint government with the ONLF for three months, until it put its house in order. This agenda was forced on the League, and the recommended regional joint government was formed as a result of this imposition.

64. Several participants in these meetings told the author how humiliating the sessions were for the Somalis. In Ethiopia, the term *GimGeme* is used to characterize such "evaluations."

65. Five participants in these deliberations told me that the League chairman was by then an instrument of the EPRDF. They also noted that he was not his old self but seemed resigned to go through the motions.

66. A new pattern of recruiting loyal and obedient political allies for the ruling party is emerging. An increasing number of regional authorities are sent to a training school in Addis Ababa called *Tatiq*. The first task of these political students is to confess openly that they are corrupt and to be consequently remorseful. The recruits are then given a political education. Critics note that this ruling party strategy is designed to create political supplicants. These people can be easily discarded when necessary, because they have already admitted to corruption and other crimes. Some League members foresaw this scheme when their party was subjected to evaluation in early 1997. The EPRDF managers of the evaluations asked members to come forward, condemn the "coup," and admit to their misdeeds. Critics compared this affair to a Somali tale that goes as follows. A lion convened a meeting for wild animals and told them he was going on a trip, but he was worried about his gravely ill mother. He instructed the animals not to call him if his mother died. The lion took his trip and then returned after a time. His mother had died in his absence. He convened another meeting and asked the animals the question: where is my mother? A hyena answered the question honestly. It was killed for disobeying the lion's instruction. Then came a zebra who reported, in order to avoid the hyena's fate, that the lion's mother was still alive. It was killed for not telling the truth. Then it was the fox's turn. Having seen the fate of the truth teller and liar, it quickly shaved the hair off one side of its head. Then the lion came to ask the fox the dreaded question. The fox turned and said to the lion, "I would not have shaved this side of my head if your mother was alive." The lion was bewildered and asked again if his mother was dead. The fox turned its head to the other side and retorted, "I would not have left this side unshaven if your mother was dead." The lion was not able to pin down the fox, and so the fox was saved. The moral of the story, according to critics, is that the only Somali party members who survived and got inducted into the new party were those who condemned the "coup" and admitted to being corrupt.

67. The law governing political party formation in Ethiopia requires that at least 750 delegates participate in the convention at which a party is being formed.

68. Some of Hussein's old colleagues noted that he was frustrated by some of the EPRDF's intrusive intervention in the region but remained in his ministerial post until he found a job with the United Nations. Obtaining the U.N. job required the federal government's support.

69. "Profile of the Somali People Democratic Party," party pamphlet, Jigjiga: SPDP.
70. Interview 18, in Jigjiga, 2002.
71. The power struggle within the TPLF in 2001, which led to the ouster and imprisonment of some of its senior leaders, has not altered the relationship between the Somali authority and the Addis Ababa regime.
72. Such advisors are the key instruments in controlling regional leaders. According to a recent study, "Perhaps the most notable form of control is applied through the presence of Tigrayan 'advisers' at regional and local administrative levels. These 'advise' the local ethnic representatives who fill the formal positions." Pausewang et al., *Ethiopia since the Derg*, p. 163.
73. Numerous interviews with MPs and executive members confirmed this claim.
74. In one instance, I was waiting for an appointment in the regional government's main office and there was a large crowd gathered outside the building. A bus approached and five men got out and walked into the building. Members of the crowd began to talk about these individuals. The language they used to describe them was revealing. The five men were federal advisers. Three were Tigray, one Amhara, and one Gurag. The commentators described the Tigray advisors as "Mareehan." Mareehan was the late Somali dictator's genealogical group. The point of the commentators was that a Tigray is a member of the privileged ruling family, as the Mareehan had been in Somalia.
75. Interview 19, in Jigjiga, 2000. The federal authorities' response during the drought-triggered famine of 1999–2000 alienated the population further. A Somali NGO distributed a report over the Internet, indicating that large numbers of people were dying of starvation in the Somali Region, particularly in the vicinity of Godey. The federal authorities were unhappy with the report for it exposed that its priorities were wrong, as it was spending millions of dollars on weapons while a significant number of its citizens were starving. The NGO was forced to flee the country. Other NGOs noted that local authorities reported the crisis to the federal government, but that the latter decided to conduct a study to find out whether conditions warranted its attention. In the meantime, several thousand people died.
76. This is noted on page 1 of the party's program. X.D.S.H.S, *Barnaamijka Siyaasadeed ee Xisbiga Dimoqradiga ee Shacbiga Soomaliyeed*, 1999 (no place or publisher given).
77. They contrast this with the role Somali men played in the front lines of the Ethiopian war with Eritrea. In 2002 some of the war veterans demonstrated in Jigjiga to attract attention to their plight. The police killed two of the demonstrators.
78. It appears that SPDP employees are on the regional government's payroll. Field notes, Jigjiga, April 1999.
79. The author's conversations with people in five communities in the region indicate that the majority of the population thought the election was an exercise in fraud and intimidation. Field notes, June 2001 and December 2001. For comparative cases in other regions, see Pausewang et al., *Ethiopia since the Derg*.
80. Field notes, Jigjiga, January 2000.
81. The president was imprisoned shortly after the election. The author visited him in Jigjiga district jail.
82. Abdi Ismail Samatar, "Leadership and Ethnicity in the Making of African State Models: Botswana versus Somalia," *Third World Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (1997): 687–707.



83. This contrasts sharply with the way the government of national unity works in democratic South Africa. Junior parties in the unity government nominate candidates for ministerial positions allotted to them. Presidents Mandela and Mbeki had no control over the nomination of IFP ministers.

84. Group Interview 7, in Jigjiga, 2002.

85. Field notes, 2002. Also Interview 20, in Addis Ababa, 2002.

86. As other researchers have noted: "While the army was reduced, local police forces were beefed up, and supported by various forces at regional and zonal levels. Police and local militia act as control organs of the party at local levels. According to Schroder's documentation, the total of all security forces is approximately the same as in Mengistu's time." Pausewang et al., *Ethiopia since the Derg*, p 234.

87. Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia*, Vol. II (Addis Ababa: Central Statistical Authority, 1999).

88. M. Wolde Mariam, "The Background of the Ethio-Somalian Boundary Dispute," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 2, no. 2 (1964): 189–219.

89. Abdi Ismail Samatar, "The Ethiopian Election of 2005: A Turning Point?" *Work in Progress*, 2005.