

The Politics of Scaremongering: The Disorder Factor in Somali Regional State of Ethiopia

By Hasan Geele

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Currently, the ruling party in the Somali Regional State (SRS) is assessing the list of its candidates for the upcoming 'election' in May 2010. But the skeptics are more than those expecting a substantial change, because, there is no chance for a fair and free election. As usual there are deliberate silencing and intimidation techniques employed against the different political voices already in motion. Hence, people in the region have no choice but to accept the corrupt politicians who failed to provide political stability and leadership in the region. However, the worthy question to ask is can the upcoming election in May 2010 lead by the politicians hand-picked by the king-makers (i.e. EPRDF) in the region be able to put their own house in order? Can they revive the wounds of the SRS by maintaining the current tit for tat practices? Or is this how the EPRDF has decided to shape the region's fate in order to benefit from the competition among the corrupt politicians? This piece is an effort to look at the politics of fear and the marriage between EPRDF and the ruling party in SRS.

Introduction

During the last eighteen years, Ethiopian people were witnessing significant political, social and economic transformation led by the People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Certainly, some Regional States, particularly Amhara, Oromia, SNNP¹ and Tigray Regional State benefited from this change substantially, while other regions, according to the published official documents remain 'Back-Ward Regions'², including Afar, Benshangul-Gumuz, Gambela and Somali Regional State (SRS). The status quo of SRS seems to be unchallenged. It



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remains a poverty-stricken region and its people still suffer from conflicts, political instability, lack of basic service and widespread corruption³. The current leadership in the region argues that poor infrastructure and the lack of security are the major causes of all the problems of the SRS. However, Federal government assessments frequently finger-point what it called “lack of committed leadership” as the number one obstacle to the region’s stability and development progress⁴. In 2005 the federal council of ministers had a discussion on the leadership problems in the region and set an aggressive deadline for the region’s leadership to solve points of disorder. In October 2008 decision makers in SRS gathered in Addis Ababa to evaluate the region’s achievements and the challenges during 2003-2008 with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. In a press release after the meeting, the leaders admitted that the region’s *de facto* ruling party, the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP) ‘did not bring about any change except being a burden on the people of the region’⁵ and prime minister Zenawi vowed that he will take necessary action against SPDP leadership if they remain in the political mayhem.

It might seem weird for some observers to notice accusations thrown by the top EPRDF officials at its own puppet in SRS. However, for the people in the region it is an inept move by the EPRDF to cover-up their failure in the region; simply because, it is the EPRDF who handpicked this predatory leadership and imposed its will on the choice-less people in the region. As the recent International Crisis Group (ICG) demonstrates in Ethiopia, particularly, in SRS there are ‘elections without competition’⁶, which gives very limited role for the local constituencies.

The power behind the throne in SRS is the representative of the EPRDF⁷ officially known as *Amakari*. Enormous number of SRS people insist that the intervention of the federal government in the day-to-day political process of the region made the regions’ politicians to be more loyal and accountable to the EPRDF representatives rather than to their own constituencies⁸. This argument have considerable amount of supporting evidence on the ground and the best example is the omnipresence of the current *amakari* Mr. Towelde in all official meetings of the region, including the SRS parliament and cabinet sessions⁹. Therefore this paper demonstrates how the local politicians are committed to maintain the status quo by adhering to the EPRDF policies toward the region. It further examines the most effective tool that the political establishment in SRS has employed in the last five years to influence the EPRDF advisers in order to maintain their position as powerful leaders despite their poor performance in both the development aspect and security problems in the region.

Somalis in Ethiopian Politics: A Brief History

Although most of the Somalis see the EPRDF discourse as rhetoric rather than a genuine change of direction, yet in 1993 the policies of marginalization toward some ethnic groups were carefully observed. The country adopted a new constitution which created nine ethnic-based regions¹⁰. It was an opportunity for the first time for the ‘Ethiopian-Somalis’ to unite their people who inhabited in three different zones *awrajas* (Hararge, Zidamo, and Bale) in the South-Eastern part of the country which resulted in the creation of Somali Regional State (SRS)¹¹.



In 1993 Ethiopian-Somali political elites from the region and the Diasporas participated in the first ‘election’ in the region and members of parliament at regional and federal level were elected. The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) appointed exclusively the first regional cabinet members as they secured a comfortable majority of the seats of SRS parliament. Unfortunately, the ONLF ignored clan dynamics of the Somali people, which is an essential factor for the political stability in the SRS and in Somali politics in general. This led to a significant level of political rivalry between clans and also between the political elites¹². This then gave the first window of opportunity for the EPRDF to intervene aggressively in the regions’ politics.

EPRDF used the concerns by some clans and the political elites as a steppingstone to reach its strategic target which was the domination of the political process in the region. As a result, the EPRDF persuaded and sponsored members in the SRS parliament; including two former regional presidents; Hassan Jire Kalinle and Iid Dahir Farah to carry out a parliamentary plot to overthrow the ONLF led government. Swiftly, the regional parliament approved an impeachment proposal of the first regional president, the late Abdulahi Mohamed Sadi. After only seven months in his presidency, Sadi was flown from Godey to Addis Ababa’s notorious prison *Alembeka*¹³.

This plot revealed the *power* of the EPRDF-backed politics and politicians. It created a new paradigm of the political power structure in the SRS – political marriage between the region’s

politicians on one side and EPRDF cadres and military establishment in the region on the other side. Therefore, in order to win the hearts and the minds of the EPRDF *amakaris* and to get rid of one's political foes, hopeful-politicians and political blocks in the region used different strategies and tactics. These include among others using bribery and accusing one of possessing *Somaliweyn* philosophy and ideas (Greater Somalia). However, the most influential tactic is accusing ones' political and/or business opponent of being *Nabad-diid* (*anti peace*). Since 2007, the behavior of accusing ones rival of being *Nabad-diid* became a trademark of not only the higher politicians but also a brand name for the civil servants and even rival private business people and organisations in the region to get rid of their opponents.

In an article, Hagmann, a prominent author about the SRS politics, revealed how the 'senior bureaucrats and civil servants have been dismissed and re-appointed at an impressive pace since 1991'¹⁴. Through a repeated *Gemgama* (self-evaluation meetings), the most persistent and frequently dismissal method employed by the SRS leadership and its federal government advisers, pulls off its goal of eliminating any opposition against the status quo from the region's public and private sector. This resulted in a high turnover of senior political officials and civil servants not seen in any other state which has contributed to the lack of stability, development and continuity in the region.

In 2007 the SRS President, Abdullahi Hasan (Lugbur) sacked the Education Bureau Head, Mr. Abdifatah sheik Abdullahi, from his cabinet after his deputy Bureau Head, Idris Ahmed, presented corruption allegations against him. He provided evidence that proved Abdifatah's corruption allegations were being filed in court. Ironically, after few months he was promoted and became the SPDP chairman and immediately secured another cabinet seat. It was revealed later that Abdifatah, skillfully, persuaded the EPRDF *amakari* in the region Ato Towelde to support him by claiming that he was targeted by an anti-peace network within the office of the president. Consequently, officials in Mr. Lugbur's office including his economic adviser and former deputy of capacity building bureau were forced to escape from the country, while Abdifatah's deputy bureau head was sentenced to 5 years imprisonment.

Nevertheless, this kind of relationship between the federal officials and some predatory leadership in the region has been strategically unwise. Specifically, it has damaged the EPRDF position in the region, hindered their effort to prevent secessionist ideas, made it more difficult to politically stabilize the region and made security problems worse. This behavior leads us to analyze why the EPRDF *amakaris* continue to promote the reshuffling practice rather than legally charging the senior officials who misuse the power and resource of the region. One can argue that it is the policy of EPRDF to maintain this status quo which left the region in poverty

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and continue to rely on and secure additional aid from the international donors. But another view point, which is very conceivable, is that the local administrators in the region enjoy considerable influence on their EPRDF partners by using carefully designed tools to strengthen their partnership.

The groups and individuals who want to be powerful players in the region's political platforms pursue two widely known strategies to encourage faithful EPRDF support for their existence. First, they use significant amount of money to bribe the decision making circles in the Prime Ministers' office and the EPRDF elites. Second they go to considerable length to ensure that military establishment in the region is favorable and sympathetic to them by using scaremongering tactics. This is due to the fact that the political power in Ethiopia is divided between EPRDF representatives and military officials in the regions. Therefore, in the following sections we examine the widely used tactic – creating fear – to shape and direct the perceptions of the military and the EPRDF *amakar* in the region.

Politics of scaremongers

Although the SPDP has been ruling the region for the last 14 years, SRS political system suffers from severe political instability. Since it gained its autonomous administration; SRS had ten presidents, the highest presidential turnover compared to any the other region. The charge of *supporting rebels* is one of the most influential tools used by the political elite. This accusation is not only misguided but sets a dangerous precedent. Anyone whom the politicians, businessmen and clan rivals in the region assume as a threat to their interest stands a good chance of getting labeled '*Nabad-diid*' (*tsira-salam*) which is a term widely used by the Ethiopian government to identify its opposition groups. In fact, anyone who speaks against the leadership expects the risk of being charged with being loyal to the rebels.

The scaremongering practices increased in a dramatic way after the 2005 election and particularly after the ONLF raid on Obolle oil explorations site in April 2007. A five day *Gemgama* conference¹⁵ conducted in Jigjiga in June 2008 which was co-chaired by the current SRS president, Daud M. Ali, and the head of Security and Justice Administration Bureau (SJAB) Abdi Mohamed Omar (Abdi Ilay) was concluded by arresting six cabinet members and more than 50 civil servants, while hundreds were fired from their jobs¹⁶. It was apparent that the targeted politicians were in one way or another associated with the former regional president Lugbur and all of them were accused of being supporters of the rebel movements.

The arbitrary and massive detentions of politicians, activists and ordinary citizens that followed the Obolle raid made prisons in SRS extremely overpopulated. As a result of that some prisoners were transferred to Oromia’s notorious prison in Ziway town in central Ethiopia. The transferred prisoners included Suldan Fowski Mahamed Ali a clan leader, who was a member of a group of Ogaden elders whom were mandated by the Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to negotiate with the ONLF officials and its supporters in the Diaspora in Europe and USA in 2005; former and the long serving SJAB head, Mahdi Ayoub and Ibrahim Haad an influential businessman who established his own private militias in the region to fight against the ONLF. He was charged in his alleged role of assisting Obolle raid. Ironically, Haad had lost two of his brothers in his fight against the rebels. Yet all of them were ultimately “convicted” of their affiliation with anti-peace elements and sentenced to serve 22, 16 and 16 years imprisonment respectively. Regional Supreme Court officials who were reluctant about the legal process were also regularly removed – from 2006-2008. The regional Supreme Court had four chiefs justices¹⁷ during that short period.



The tendency to accuse political foes in SRS of being rebel supporters was intensified in March 2008, when the fourth general conference of the region’s ruling party SPDP released a report by the then its vice chairman who later became regional President Da’ud Mohamed Ali. He identified a group of prominent politicians (widely known as SPDP’s old-gourd) including Ethiopia’s Culture and Tourist Minister Mohamoud Dirir; Minister of State of Finance and Economic Development, Ahmed Shide; Minister of State of Women’s Affairs, Ubah Mohamed Hussein; Bashir Abdilahi Aydarus, Minister of State of Agriculture and Rural Development and two former SRS presidents Mohamed Moalin Ali (Khadar) and Abdirashid Dulane currently State Minister of Labor and Social Affairs and Ethiopian ambassador to Japan respectively. It is actually quite ironic that all of them were accused of being reluctant in the fight against anti-peace elements. In his speech Abdi Mohamed Omar (Ilay) head of the SJAB also insisted that these politicians were affiliated with ONLF and purposely confined their efforts to combat the threat of the anti-peace elements and revealed that some their close relatives are also active members of the ONLF. Ilay furiously proposed their dismissal from the party’s membership, a request which the conference participants unanimously adopted¹⁸.

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In addition to that the business license of 34 private contractors were abruptly revoked in July 2008 accusing them of financial and moral support they allegedly provided to the rebel groups. However, only few were legally charged. The absence of reliable evidence in incriminating the accused and the economic blockade that was adopted to collectively punish clans who allegedly support rebel groups increased public suffering. Nevertheless the regional and federal government officials continue to ignore the painful pictures and stories coming out from the ordinary citizens of the region and the international human rights organizations.

No one is denying the presence of insurgent movements in the SRS and the fact that there are groups and individuals who have sympathy for the rebel movements, their causes and ideologies, but the ‘collective punishment’ employed by the brutal military forces in the region in collaboration with some predatory leaders is adding fuel to the fire. It further increases the frustration of the people in the region with the regional and Ethiopian governments, including those who were initially sympathetic to the EPRDF regime. However, the charge of supporting anti-peace elements remains a widely used weapon for dealing with critics of poor governance. This rhetoric has been effective for number of reasons. First, the Ethiopian government does not have effective intelligence units – because of language difficulties between local Somali lowlanders and military personal in the region which is dominated by other Ethiopian highlanders. Instead they utterly rely on intelligence information provided by the regional politicians. As a result of that the fear of being labeled supporter of rebel groups prevented many intellectuals to openly speak against the SRS leadership.

Second, the charge of supporting rebel elements works to marginalize them easily in the eyes of the brutal military institution in the region. If the accusation sticks, the critics’ arguments will not be taken seriously by both military generals and EPRDF representatives. People also will be very reluctant to associate themselves with anyone who has been charged as supporter of anti-peace elements, because doing so could have a terrifying effect on their own safety.

Finally, this strategy works because it is difficult for anyone to prove beyond all doubt that he or she is not a supporter of rebel group. Therefore, this charge has a potent way of making sure that one’s rivals were rarely spoken after the accusation.

Conclusion

The securitization of politics and the creation of fear by the leadership in the region helped lead its people into a disastrous economic situation and humanitarian tragedy which confined its efforts to deal with the rebel groups. Ironically, their tactics remain to encourage the EPRDF

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elite to back their ill-conceived development and security policies – if there were any – in the region. This in turn strengthened rebel groups, drove intellectuals to flee the country and further tarnished the EPRDF's image in the region. The marriage between the predatory local administrators and the EPRDF elites in the region bear complete responsibility for each of these developments, and none of them was good for both the region and the country. Their partnership has not helped the military operations either. Especially in recent years the tactics of the region's leadership has made impossible for the military to overcome the rising rebellion movements, which for the first time tried to seize some districts and managed to carry out an assassination attempt of the former regional president Abdulahi Hassan (Lugbur) who was seriously injured in Jigjiga during operation.

To stop these palpable nonsense accusations and the tit for tat behavior that the predatory leadership has inflicted on the people and to revive the economy and the wellbeing of the SRS; a new strategy is obviously needed. This must begin with the evaluation of the power and the tactics of the local politicians and the *amakaris* in the region. Designing a fresh course will therefore require the development of new relationship between people and their leadership in the region. In other words people in the region should be empowered to elect and evaluate their leaders for and by themselves and the EPRDF should create a better relationship with the people instead of relying on opportunistic corrupted individuals who brought nothing but sterile accusation and counter accusations among themselves.

If such measurements are not seriously and urgently considered as Ethiopia heads to a general 'election' in the next few weeks; it is predictable, to any observer, that the security and economic situation in the region and eventually the country will deteriorate, which in turn will have a serious impact on the war-trapped region of the Horn of Africa.

Hasan Geele

Email: suuqyare@yahoo.com

Hasan Geele is a human rights activist

References

¹ SNNPRS: Southern Nations Nationalities and People's Regional State constitutes over 45 ethnic groups, including Gurage, Kambata Sidama, Silte and Walayta

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³ Hahmann, T. and Hoehne, M. V. 2009 *Failures of the State Failure Debate: evidence from the Somali territories*, *Journal of International Development* 21(1), pp. 42-57. IDS (Institute of Development Studies), 2006. *Vulnerable Livelihoods in Somali Region, Ethiopia*. Brighton: IDS Research Report 57.

⁴ In 2005 Abaye Sahay former Minister of federal Affairs and Current National Security Adviser warned that they will propose to federal parliament a bill to suspend SRS autonomous government accusing the failure of the regional leadership to overcome regions problems

⁵ Appointment and dismissal continue in Somali Region See <http://en.ethiopianreporter.com/content/view/55/26/>

⁶ ICG International Crisis Group, 2009. *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and its Discontent*, Africa Report N°153 – 4 September 2009

⁷ EPRDF has representatives in the regions, particularly, in four 'Back-warded regions' Afar, Benshangul, Gambela and Somali regions.

⁸ Haggmann T. 2007 *The Political Roots of the Current Crisis in Region 5*. The Social Science Research Council accessed on 25 February 2009

⁹ Ato Towelde who is the EPRDF representative in the region is the power behind the throne. He involves the region's decision making process, he participate all official meetings in the region including cabinet meetings. SRS Presidents nominate officials with his consultation and his approval.

¹⁰ According to the article 47 (1) of the federal constitution Ethiopian federalism constitute nine regional states 1) Tigray, 2) Afar, 3) Amhara, 4) Oromia, 5) Somali, 6) Benshangul-Gumuz, 7) SNNRS, 8) Gambela, and 9) Harari Regional State.

¹¹ Rediker E. 2004. *The Ogaden: A Microcosm of global conflict* and Markakis, J. 1994. *The Somali in the New Political Order of Ethiopia*. Review of African Political Economy

¹² Samatar, 2005 *Ethiopian Ethnic Federalism and Regional Autonomy: The Somali Test*. Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies

¹³ President Sadi was Accused by misusing Humanitarian Food for Drought affected people

¹⁴ Haggmann Tobias, 2005 *Beyond clannishness and colonialism: understanding political disorder in Ethiopia's Somali Region, 1991-2004* *Journal of Modern African Studies* 43(4) 509-36

¹⁵ In every 2-3 months, EPRDF officials and SRS leaders continuously conduct evaluation meetings known as *Gemgema* to monitor regions security and development performance

¹⁶ The detained officials include the Heads of the Bureaus of Agriculture, Revenue, PCDP, and office of the President and the Deputy Heads of Education, Finance and Transport bureaus. This but the region's most important cabinet members the bars without genuine and tangible evidence; (SRS has 19 cabinet members including the president and Vice president) behind. See <http://en.ethiopianreporter.com/content/view/55/26/>

¹⁷ In 2006-2008 regional Supreme Court had four chiefs: Kadir Ahmed, Abdirahman Regah, Abdilahi Jan and Mawlid Adan the first three of them were sacked after arguments with security officials

The Politics of Scaremongering: The Disorder Factor in Somali Regional State of Ethiopia

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¹⁸ See the official website of the SRS Security and Justice Administration Bureau <http://eegga.com/?q=node/101>

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