

# Political Drama in the Somali Region of Ethiopia

By Karamarda Group

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A spectacle that has been part of the political culture of the Somali Region of Ethiopia since the early 1990s is once again entertaining the citizens of that region. For the past two months, the chatter in every teashop or mafresh has been whether Abdi Mohamed Omer (“Abdi Iley”), the current Somali Regional president, will remain in office or depart, who might replace him. Despite no influence in the process or the outcome of this political wrangle, ordinary folks continue to engage in lively debates; hoping for miracles that will herald a positive change that will end the anguish of this long-suffering land.



For the past four years, the power of Abdi Omer’s presidency has been felt beyond the Somali region’s borders. He has intimidated dissidents in and across the continent, killed and jailed countless innocent men and women, and has reportedly embezzled millions of dollars from the regional treasury.

Omer was tabbed for the regional presidency after his predecessor, Daud Mohamed Ali, was ousted in 2010 for failing to ingratiate as expected with the Eastern Military commander, Major General Abraha Wolde Gabriel. Since then Abdi Omer, with the blessing of the General, has ruled the Somali region with an iron fist. But now, Omer’s political power is challenged by his handpicked executive committee; minions who until this political fallout addressed him dutifully as Aabo ‘father.’ In this piece, we will look at how the revered ‘father’ begun to tighten his grip on power and came to be the most hated and feared man in the region, as well as the legacy he leaves behind if indeed his time came to end.

## **Somali Regional structure and politics:**

In order to understand the political dispute, one has to look at the governance structure in Somali Region. The region is controlled by a single political party: the Somali People’s Democratic Party (SPDP). The party has a central committee and the executive branch, which together make up the leading political body that oversees the region. The Party selects all of its parliamentary members to the regional as well as the federal parliament. Then you have the administrative body of the Somali Region put together from high ranking party members to manage day to day tasks at the ministerial level, whether an

individual holds an office or not, being a member at the executive branch of the party provides an important role at the political play when such dispute arises.

The executive branch consists of 13 members that are split in two opposing groups: President's group consisting of four members, including the chairman of the party who is also the Speaker of the parliament (we will call these G4). The other group consists of seven members that include three vice-presidents led by Abdullahi Yusuf Weerar "Ethiopia" (we will refer to these as the G7).

### **The origins of the dispute:**

The cause of the dispute is not clear, however, judging from past, based on the history of 10 presidencies since September 23, 1993 in the Somali Region, we can say with certainty that such disputes are instigated by the central government in Addis. When military leaders or EPRDF cadres want to oust someone from a position, they approach and encourage a group from the ruling party executive team to be whistle blowers in one of the Gemgama formats held to diminish Regional autonomy. Hence, G7 went on the offensive at the office of the Prime minister for the federal affaires and exposed what is happening in Somali Region. In retaliation, on September 8/2014, the president sacked first vice president Abdullahi Yusuf Weerar from the Somali Regional Security office. Soon after, G7 met in Dire Dawa and announced the expulsion of G4 from the executive branch of the party. Two days later, G4 announced the creation of a technical committee consisting of nine members in an attempt to restructure the party. The turns and twists of the political drama in the region continue, but what is important for a general reader is how each side is framing the dispute.

G7's political talking points have been to describe the dispute as one arising from constitutional differences. They are accusing the President of exercising his powers beyond what the constitution allows. They charge him with corruption, nepotism and creating never ending hostility in the region, in particular directly benefiting from the war against the Ogaden National Front (ONLF). For their part, G4 maintains that the dispute is expected among party members and the platform to solve such conflict should be internally and their action is unconstitutional.

Both sides are backed by two strongmen from the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The head of the Ethiopian National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) who is also an influential member of the executive committee of the EPRDF, Getachew Assefa, is said to be endorsing G7's position. According to insiders, Assefa has been a strong antagonist of the Somali president and want him hold accountable for his mismanagement of the region. He argues that Abdi Mohamed Omer is more damaging to Ethiopian image abroad and, in the long run poses a serious threat to Ethiopian national security. The President's G4 is supported fully by the military apparatus led by Major General Abraha Wolde. The President has reportedly facilitated lucrative contracts worth in the millions for the General and his

family. Though the Ethiopian Prime Minister supports the NISS chief Assefa, he lacks the power to influence or intervene. The G7 members have been exiled for a while in Addis Ababa as a result of the standoff



### **How does the president become so powerful?**

The Somali regional President, as any regional president in the Federal Republic of Ethiopia, has a constitutional authority. In the Somali Region, however, the constitution is simply on paper. The members of the parliament are not elected by the people, but are chosen by the military and EPRDF cadres to represent the Somali people. The Somali officials are, therefore, accountable to those cadres and military commanders that brought them to power rather than to their people, as one would expect (See further analysis here [how the political power function in the Somali Region here: 2010 Election and the Formidable Cartel in the Somali Region.](#)

President Omer was initially handpicked by Daud Mohamed, the former regional president when he spoke for the first time at SPDP party meeting in 2007 to oppose how party members were selected to represent Qorahay Zone. Omer's confidence impressed the former president, he saw a man who has neither humility nor fear to say what is in his mind. He immediately lobbied to have him appointed to one of the ministry at the regional level. Shortly after that meeting Omer was assigned to run the investment office, and within six months he was transferred to be the head of the security office in the region.

The new position was a golden opportunity for Omer to excel and impress the EPRDF cadres and the military commanders. Immediately after taking office, he transformed the security office creating an espionage unit to gather information on ONLF and Diaspora supporters, implemented the *Liyu* police project, and substantially increased the budget of the security office, which now receives largest budget of the region.

Daud Mohamed Abdi increasingly became wary due to the growing influence and partnership between the military commander, Abraha Wolde, and Abdi Omer. In May, 2010 he lobbied unsuccessfully to remove him from office. Abdi Mohamed Omer emerged winner in that dispute to become the new president of the Somali Region of Ethiopia.

Soon after becoming the President, Omer's first move was to consolidate power and create his own empire. Significant number of his clansmen returned from Diaspora to assist him in this new venture, even those who were once core members of the ONLF denounced the struggle and surrender to Jigjiga. Today every economic sector as well as running the Liyu police Para- Military in the region is controlled by his close relatives. Even the export and distribution of Chat (Qat), import of soft drinks and construction materials were taken away from veteran business man and women and has been given to his clansman returned from ONLF just a year ago from Nairobi and London. What is more surprising and a clear indication of naked favoritism is the story of Colonel Sheikh Mukater, one of the most powerful individual in the region who was captured in one of the battles against ONLF about two years ago, in fewer than two years, he is released from jail, recruited to Liyu police, promoted to colonel and is serving as the



chief of intelligence in the region. ([\*watch the video when Sheikh Mukater was caught\*](#)) Thus, through tight clan and marriage connection, Abdi commands a regiment of 20,000 Liyu police Para-military that operates in Somali region and in the Ethiopian controlled Somali republic. He is also in charge of the notorious jail Ogaden.

### What has been his Legacy so far?

Abdi has done everything in his power to prolong his grip to power. In the mid of September, 2014, when the dispute becomes public, the Federal Affairs summoned the two feuding groups to Addis to assess the situation through Gemgema (Evaluation). In that meeting, Omer allegedly defended himself and his presidency (some say tearfully), saying:

*“I have fought along with you and slaughtered my people. I have created enemies because of the fight I wage against anti-peace elements. Where am I going to live if my job is taken away?”*

Omer's desperation to remain in power did not end with that outburst. Earlier this month (September) he unlawfully handed over Somali towns (Cadhayto, Candhuftu and Gadhamayto) to the Afar region in a bid to prolong his power. The land dispute between Afars and Somalis has been debated for many years, even the late Prime Minister, Meles Zinawi, met with the Somali elders on several occasions failing to convince them to turn the towns over to the Afars. Somalis overwhelmingly populate these towns and if it came to a referendum, they would succeed, a fact not lost on the federal government.



In addition to giving away lands belonging to Somali people, to show his affection and loyalty to Tigary Region; he changed Somali Region flag to resemble that of Tigray by altering any symbol of Somali indication from the flag. To further integrate (or even assimilate) the Somali region with north Ethiopia, Fridays are no longer public holidays in the Somali region as dictated by the Muslim faith. The most egregious of Abdi Omer's infractions, however, is the massacre of numerous young man, women, children and the hundreds that still remain imprisoned in Jail Ogaadeen.



### **Who is in Line to replace him?**

One of Abdis's schemes in managing the Somali region affaires was to eradicate any one with dignity, wisdom and intellect. As such the Region is left with young politician who are eager to please him and serve anyone from Tigray Region. Until this couple of weeks, no one dare from his cabinet to disagree with him let alone to challenge. Therefore it is difficult to name any leader on the line that will take on the enormous challenge facing the Somali Region. In fact, we strongly believe if the opposing group (G7) succeeds him, conditions in the region could worsen. The experience of these young politicians is simply limited in mirroring Abdi and has no other experience in running government offices.

We predict the Military along with EPRDF cadres in Somali Region as usual are busy vetting the individual who will act as the next Somali president. EPRDF has to realize after 20 Years of failed policy of selecting the weakest individual in Somali Region did not produce peace or eradicated ONLF. In fact, this policy has been contra productive in creating peace and prosperity in the Somali Region. We call on the EPRDF leaders to let the Somali people choose their leadership and stop the military meddling in the Somali Regional Sate administrative affaires.

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