



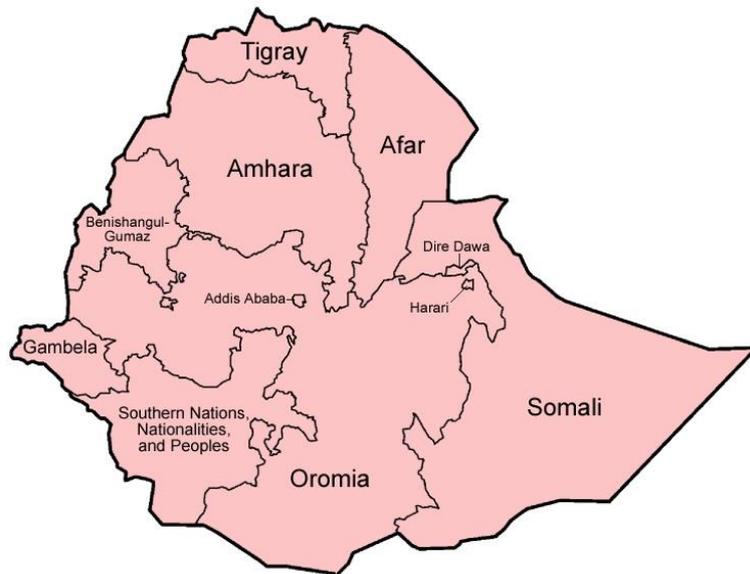
The Ogaden Region Right to Self-Determination: Its Ups and Downs

By Osman Hassan

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The Somali region under Ethiopia rule, better known internationally as the Ogaden¹, has recently been in the throes of turmoil not of its own making. What we have witnessed there is the direct takeover of the area by the Ethiopian federal army, and the sacking of its leader and his so-called administration. This development inevitably raises serious questions and sends messages, to all to whom it may concern:

Is it the case as Addis Ababa that what Ethiopia did to the Somali region, admittedly a flagrant violation of the region's autonomous status (if it is binding), is nothing more than an unavoidable one-off intervention in order to respond to what it considered a dangerous crisis but otherwise respects the constitutional status of the Somali region? Or is the truth, pure and simple, that the Ethiopian government has taken off the kid gloves and dispensed with the self-serving self-rule charade and dealt with the region as the colony it is, and free to initiate "regime change" each time it wants to replace one compliant gatekeeper with another for its own ends? Needless to say, this is the case.



¹ the Ogaden and "Somali Region" designations are used as appropriate for the benefit of international readers who are more familiar with the historical Ogaden region name.

In coming to power, Abiy Ahmed needed the actions he took in the Somali Region, often the punching bag for Ethiopian rulers, to send messages to his intended audiences: first to his ethnic Oromo constituency that he is not neutral but on their side in the ethnic clashes between them and Somalis, or between the leaders of the two regional states, but puts the blame squarely on Abdi Ilay's shoulders and his administration for which they have to pay the price. Secondly, he was playing to the international gallery that he is serious about his commitment to respect for human rights and a clean-up of Abdi Ilay's rotten Gulags was the best place to start. Thirdly, he wanted to send a message to his Amhara and Tigrean detractors that they have to, like it or not, reconcile themselves to an Oromo-led Ethiopia under his leadership.

The glaring different treatments accorded to the regions are instructive. Addis Ababa would not dare or rush to intervene in other federal regions because they are the real true Ethiopians enjoying their rightful constitutional powers. In a word, they are untouchable when it comes to their internal affairs. Addis Ababa can of course use its wider federal powers and declare a state of emergency, or act on overall national matters affecting the whole country as a whole like public disorder or humanitarian disaster. But other than the Somali region, it keeps out of their internal affairs.

The different treatment arises because of the two different classes of people in the Empire. On one side are the original Abyssinians and their assimilated and Amharized peoples/regions. Though some are more equal than others in this group, what unites them is that they consider themselves Ethiopian by choice and together are the masters of the land and power rotates among them. [On the other hand, the Somali region](#) that belongs to a people that had been at war with Abyssinia off and on for centuries is physically part of Ethiopia by force but otherwise maintain their national Somali identity and aspirations and rarely subconsciously see themselves Ethiopian nor do the other group see the Somalis as one of them. They are a conquest that cannot be assimilated nor Amharized. And for that, they are permanently condemned to the bottom of the ladder. We have seen a USA led for the first time by an Afro-American. It is nigh impossible to see an Ethiopia led by a Somali.

The misfortune of the Somali region is that it is under a black colonial power and not a European one as the rest of black Africa had. With the wind of change blowing against colonialism in the early 1960s, it was easier to dislodge European colonialism but little attention was paid to Ethiopia's case as if colonialism is alien among blacks. With its unique history in a continent that largely had little else history to be proud of, Africans emerging from the indignity of colonial rule idolized Haile Selassie and Ethiopia as the mother of Africa and for that reason paid little attention to its true colours as an empire colonizing other territories. Ethiopia shrewdly exploited these valuable sentiments to win its bid to have Addis Ababa as the seat of the OAU (now the AU). The leverage it acquired helped it to ward off the demand for self-determination and independence by its colonial territories (Eretria and the Ogaden).

On the premise that the Ogaden is an occupied colony of Ethiopia, this article is devoted to the history of the right of the Ogaden people to self-determination, the ups and downs of their cause and where they go from here as they find themselves in a ditch.

Division of the Somali Homeland and the Resistance

The point of departure is a brief reminder of the genesis of the problem. The Somali homeland was carved up at the Berlin conference in 1884 and Abyssinia under Emperor Menelik (as it was called then) was given the Ogaden region, appealing to sympathetic Christian colonizers partitioning Africa that his kingdom was a lone Christian island surrounded by a sea of hostile Muslim nations and needed to expand to the sea.

Since their partition, it was the Somali Darwish liberation movement led by Sayid Mohamed Abdalla Hassan which drew world p attention to the resistance of the Somali people to be divided up and colonized and made them aware of their aspirations for freedom and unity. From this beginning, the Ogaden was inseparable from the Somali quest for the liberation of the five Somali-lands. Though Sayid Mohamed Abdalla Hassan was militarily defeated in the end, his legacy lived on with his mantle taken up after the Second World War by the birth of pan-Somali nationalism under the banner of Greater Somalia.

The end of the Second World War heralded the beginning of the demise of colonialism worldwide and from the Somali perspective was a historical watershed as the first colonies in Africa to receive the attention of the international community. With Great Britain administering four of the Somali-lands after the defeat of Italy of Italy in the war, it was fitting that Britain, which played a leading role in the fragmentation of the Somali homeland in the first place, should be the one to call, under the guidance of its foreign minister, Earnest Bevin, for the unification of these Somali territories under its trusteeship for their eventual independence. Unfortunately, USA, France and the Soviet Union opposed it, not so much against the principle but objecting to what they saw as British colonial territorial aggrandizement at their cost.

All the same, all was not in vain. It should be pointed out that the three European colonizers did abide finally by the UN Charter - that “All peoples have the *right to self-determination*....to freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” - and in this regard gave independence to their colonies, though in the case of the NFD Britain rode roughshod over the wishes of the ethnic Somali inhabitants who overwhelmingly voted in a plebiscite to unite with Somalia. Britain denied them their choice in the face of strong opposition from Kenya’s pre-independence leaders.

The exception among the colonisers was of course Ethiopia which turned deaf ear to the wind of change and kept the Ogaden region as simply its patrimony.

It got away with it because there was no pressure from the rest of the world on a black colonizer. Only Somalia kept up the demand for its independence. Its actions initially were largely symbolic gestures from Radio Mogadishu exhorting the people to wake up to their colonial status.

The 1977 Somali-Ethiopia War: gains and losses for the Ogaden

The Ogaden war was a watershed in the political history of the Ogaden region, or for that matter the pursuit of Somali irredentism. At least, the war put the Ogaden region for the first time at the forefront of world attention since the Second World. Somalia has been planning and preparing for over a decade for the day when it would have militarily the upper hand over Ethiopia and at a time more favourable to it. That happened in June 1977.



Two factors dictated that timing of the war for Somalia. The first welcome development was the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 by the Marxist dictator Mengestu Haile Marian who plunged Ethiopia into turmoil with his ruthless revolutionary excesses, alienating most of his people and the country's traditional western backers. But a parallel worrying development pushing for the rush to the war was that Ethiopia was getting ever closer to the Soviets ideologically and militarily - increasingly downgrading and squeezing out Somalia. Given these exigencies, it was a race against time before Ethiopia could get military hardware from the USSR and acquire the capacity to use it.

The high tide of the Ogaden cause

When the war broke out, it was waged by the mighty Somali national army with the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) playing a token role - enough to give it legitimacy as active freedom fighters. More than anything else, the war will be remembered for the Somali army's stunning lightning blitz in which it captured within few weeks almost the whole Ogaden region (less Harar and Dire Dewa). For the good of the Ogaden cause, the war attracted the media from all corners of the world (I was one of them for the BBC African Service), partly because there was no other major ongoing war in the world at the time, and also because the Horn of Africa was becoming a cockpit of super power rivalry.

Happily again for the Ogaden region, Mogadishu was the only gateway for the foreign media to reach the liberated areas. For its part, Ethiopia was isolated and could only watch helplessly from the sidelines denying what was undeniable as its humbling defeat and dark colonial rule in the region were fully exposed and disseminated by the visiting media to the world.

As one group of reporters and journalists complete their visit and return to Mogadishu to report back to home countries, a fresh group would come and go on the same trail. That has been the pattern throughout that summer.

Until then, the world was vaguely aware of the area as an Ethiopia conquest but otherwise lacked direct information as to the plight, struggle or aspirations of the people that could merit their attention or sympathy.

All that changed with the stream of first-hand, on-the-spot reporting from the foreign media beaming daily and nightly to their readers, audiences and listeners around the world what they saw with their own eyes and captured with their cameras - the captivating scenes everywhere they went of the populations coming out in their thousands, at last free to vent their bent-up hatred of their colonizer; and also spotlighting the wider plight of the people and the prevailing abysmal socio and economic underdevelopment in the region even by Ethiopian standards of that epoch. ([See the YouTube links for the capture of Godey](#) and [John Snow of British ITV reporting from Jigjiga](#))

These exposures of the realities in the Ogaden have created sea change in the public awareness worldwide, and garnered sympathy for its freedom and union with Somalia. Somalia's actions in the Ogaden had similarities with India's liberation of Goa (lying on the sub-continent) in 1991 after centuries of Portugal rule. Except for some fellow NATO members, Indian's action was largely accepted by the international community at the time as consistent with the Charter of the UN.

The Ogaden case did even better than that of Goa. Almost all the foreign media (and in particular western ones) were openly on the side of the region's liberation and negative government reactions were conspicuous by their absence. Indeed, there was overall tacit undeclared welcome to this quick end of a long-standing problem just as India did. Even the Soviet Union is said (true or not?) to have told Siyad Barre to halt Somalia's offensive at Jigjiga to allow time for mediation.

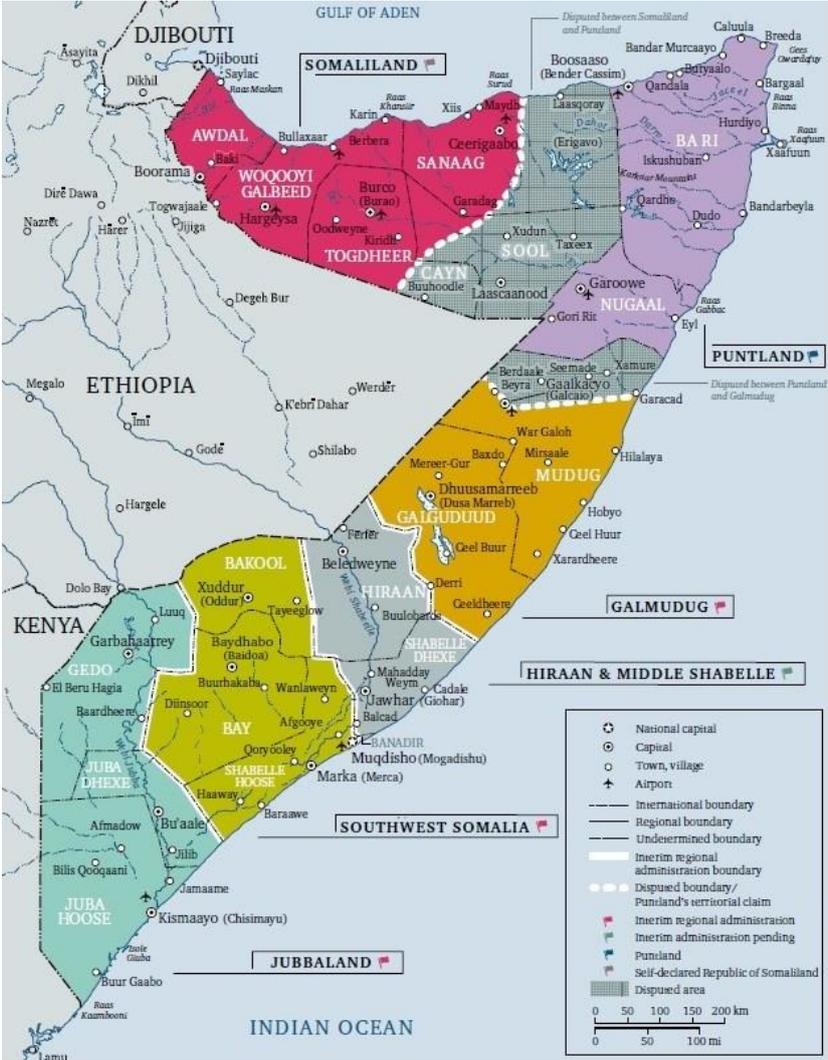
Unlike the case of Goa, Somalia was never openly branded as an aggressor. More precisely, the Ogden war was not even taken to the Security Council or for that matter to the OAU. Ethiopia shied away from that aware that it was facing similar liberation struggles in Eretria and Tigray, the former of which had widespread international support. Instead, it contended itself with an OAU mediation committee which met in Libreville, Gabon in August 1977 but collapsed after Ethiopia refused to sit with delegates from the WSLF.

Until the communist bloc intervention on the side of Ethiopia, it was a year of victory for Somalia militarily and diplomatically it was not sanctioned neither by the UN Security Council nor the OAU. If it succeeded, it would have brought closer Greater Somalia and also most likely led to disintegration of the Ethiopia.

That outcome however has been averted by a super power intervention on the side of Ethiopia which instead brought about the collapse of the Somali State and the breakup of Somalia itself.

From the Brink of Defeat to Pax Ethiopiana

The lesson Ethiopia learned from the war was that Somalia’s yearning for Greater Somalia (at least at the time) is the mother and driver behind the quest for the liberation of the Ogaden region, two goals that are inseparable. To sever this link, its answer was to go for the jugular and dismantle Somalia’s own unity, the embodiment of Greater Somalia. That goal was to be accomplished through clan-cum-regional fragmentations and secessions that would cripple the Somali State. It did not have to invade Somalia to achieve this goal but simply used Somalis willing to do the job for their own myopic ends. What they did went beyond Ethiopia’s wildest dreams: bringing down the Somali State and in its wake usher a civil war whose catastrophic consequences are the breakup of Somalia’s unity, the demise of Somali nationalism and support for Greater Somalia and by implication for the Ogaden cause.



Once the State collapsed, thanks to those rebel movements, Ethiopia ensured that whatever government was resurrected from the ashes of the fallen state would remain hamstrung, dysfunctional and never a threat to it again. Towards this end, it played a leading role, together with its friends in the international community and pliant regional leaders, in

saddling Somalia with a divisive self-defeating federal form of government in which the central government has little or no authority over the regional member states and all vie for Ethiopia's patronage. And so, Ethiopia has become by choice the arbiter of Somalia's affairs.

In all this, the first casualty is the unity of the country when the victorious secessionists declared the breakup of Somalia. No Somali leader in Mogadishu since the toppling of Siyad Barre has set foot in the north to be with his people or give solidarity to those defending the unity of the country against the secessionists. It is as if Somalia has become synonymous with ex-Italian Somaliland. The second consequence is the demise of the aspirations of Greater Somalia. And the final loser, which follows from these two, is the Ogaden cause. Worse, their nationalists resident in Somalia came to be hunted like animals by the regions and Mogadishu alike (Qalbi Dhagax) and handed to Ethiopia to win its favours.

In the race to please Ethiopia, former President Hassan Sheikh went to Jigjiga while in office to renounce Greater Somalia unilaterally and without mandate. His advice to his hosts was that they should forget about secession and unity with Somalia and instead accept their lot within Ethiopia (at the same time he cynically panders to Somaliland's secession). For his part, Farmaajo upstaged his predecessor's historical appeasement at Jigjiga by calling for the unity of Somalia and Ethiopian, which, if it comes to that (God forbid), will no doubt mutate in time into Greater Ethiopia. With leaders like these, Somalia's founding fathers must be turning in their graves.

The Low Ebb of the Ogaden Struggle

The people in the Ogaden Region have been dealt successive devastating blows. First, the loss of the war that was supposed to liberate them to over a million of them fleeing to Somalia to seek refuge and those remaining subject to retribution from the ruthless Mengestu Haile Marian. Secondly, they lost their main backer, Somalia. Just as some Arab States in the Middle East have ditched the Palestinian cause and now reach out to their nemesis, Israel, so have post-Siyad Barre governments of whatever type look to Ethiopia as their patron and now turn their back on the cause of Somali unity, Greater Somalia and above abandoned support for the cause of the Somali Region.

Having neutralised Somalia, Ethiopia turned to deal with the Somali Region and replicated the modus operandi it used to wreck Somalia. Unlike in the past when its own federal army would be used to ruthlessly suppress the population with impunity, this time it has given free hand to its puppet regional administration to do the job for it, and above all uproot support for the Ogaden Liberation Front (ONLF). In implementing his master's orders, Abdi Iley, the outgoing disgraced leader of the region has incarcerated thousands of people in his own Gulags (the Ogaden jail for one). His security police, a law unto themselves, were unleashed on the population and committed widespread abuses with impunity. Ethiopia condoned all this and was happy that he succeeded to subdue the region and hobble ONLF.

When mission is accomplished, the reward for puppets when they are no longer useful is sometimes the boot and this is the case with Abdi Ilay. Changing him at the behest of Ethiopia, only changes the gatekeepers but otherwise little else.

Which way for the ONLF: Liberators or Collaborators?

The Ogaden Liberation Front stands at crossroads. Thus far, it has been steadfast in championing the liberation of the Somali Region from Ethiopian colonial rule. It has now come home from exile after it was decriminalised by Abiy Ahmed and dialogue with the Ethiopian government is already underway which inevitably raises some questions. Is ONLF likely to give up its struggle in exchange for a deal with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed?

Whatever its intentions, the odds ONLF faces vis-à-vis its negotiation with Ethiopia are not difficult to contemplate. For one thing, they are facing the Ethiopia government at a time when it almost on its knees militarily. Secondly, and more intractable is their irreconcilable and diametrically opposing view about the ownership of the region. For the Somalis in the region, it is theirs albeit a de facto colony. For the Ethiopians, the region is theirs and its people are mere subjects. That is a mentality they share with other fellow colonialists. The British for example held Somaliland as Her majesty's territory and not the Somalis.²

This mentality of owning the region is historically deep-rooted among the region's high-land rulers and Abiy Ahmed is no exception now that the baton of power has passed to his Oromo. That is clear from his recent edict that only 4 or 5% of the proceeds from the region's carbohydrates will go to the Somali Region and the rest pocketed by Addis Ababa. Again, this mentality of dispossessing the indigenous people of the region is something it has in common with former colonisers who too rarely shared with the "natives" the natural resources they looted from their colonies.

Abiy Ahmed may feel he has all the cards for now and for that reason under no urge to cede much ground in the negotiations. For the ONLF, taking its lesson from the history of other liberation movements, it could rightly claim to hold the ace card by the fact that it is an undefeated functioning liberation movement, and as long as it remains so, Ethiopia is beatable in time and their goal is winnable as in the case of Eritrea.

Though facing no pressure from Somalia, or from the international community, or within the region itself, all the same Abiy Ahmed will resist the temptation to treat the ONLF as a spent

² They were instead Her Majesty's "protected" persons. The clans except one had separate protection treaties with the British to protect them against each other. A British Protected Person status was in those days highly cherished and that bond between the ex-protector and protégé still remains (sorry, can't resist digressing!!).

force. Crippled militarily it may be for now, but he knows it is not yet down and out and could make a comeback at a time of its choice. That reality and the need to hamstring the ONLF politically as it has done militarily are likely to be uppermost in Abiy's calculations.

He is likely to calculate that if he succeeds to lure them to come on board his "New Ethiopia" as partners, with the least possible concessions, that could be the surest way to destroy its credibility and lose the trust of its people. How many will jump on his bandwagon is difficult say at this point. No doubt he will count on the appeal his offers hold for some of the aging or needy ONLF cadres long in the bush or wilderness and now eager for better life for a change. As some fall for the bait that could open the floodgates for others to follow suit as Abiy is banking on. It is difficult to believe that the ONLF will fall for its own suicide.

The Right Way for the Somali Region

Broadly speaking, the ONLF should stay the course and remain a liberation organisation until its goal is achieved. No other liberation movement in Africa has failed to win its objective and the ONLF should be no exception. And, taking advantage in the meantime of the wind of change blowing in Ethiopia for what it is worth for the Somali Region, it has to exhaust the political option and peaceful negotiations with their adversary until such time as this fails and the armed struggle becomes the only option.

The onus will be on the Ethiopian government if it denies the Somali Region, as a de facto colony, its inalienable right to self-determination as enshrined in the UN Charter and the right to secede as it granted Eritria and as permitted by its constitution. Such denial, if it comes to that, would not be altogether in vain since it will give the movement the moral high ground in the eyes of the international community and the justification to wage the armed struggle once again.

To maintain its legitimacy at home and abroad, the ONLF should ensure the following requirements: '

1. That its leaders remain in exile until such time that the territory is free. It should be active articulating the right of the Somali Region to self-determination;
2. That it is allowed, as part of any deal with the Ethiopian government, to be in the territory and exercise its inalienable right as a political organisation to promote the civil, economic and political rights of the people of the Somali Region in accordance with United Nations human rights covenants and conventions;
3. That the region, as a de facto colony of Ethiopia, cannot have any links with its ruling party and it is imperative that such link - and others that may exist- be terminated;
4. That the procedures and mechanisms for the selection of the Region's leader and appointments to the local administration be decided locally under the guidance of ONLF;

5. That allowing the exploitation of the natural resources of the Somali Region will only be for the benefit of Ethiopia alone as Abiy claimed and will be used to maintain its colonial rule over the territory. These resources belong to its people alone - present and future unborn generations - and for that reason their exploitation should await when they have sovereignty over it.

Finally, the Somali Region, aka Ogden region is, in one word, a microcosm of the Somali nation and hence indivisible from it, much as failed venal Somali leaders are disposed to give it away to its nemesis. Those who share its aspiration share also its struggle and pain.

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