

Somalis: you “ain’t seen nothing” yet

By Faisal Roble

Resizing the Somali Regional State (Region 5) to an ever-shrinking arid area is a politically shrewd way to satisfy Oromo political demands at the expense of Somalis in the Somali National State of Ethiopia

Was the 1991 Transitional Map a Ploy?

In 1991, right after the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) rebel insurgents ousted the former dictator, Mengistu Haile Mariam, I joined the then brewing debate among the Diaspora community with a debut article titled “The New Map

of Ethiopia, a Natural Outcome” (Ethiopian Review, June 1992). The original charter map of the transitional government of Ethiopia, drafted in 1991, was based on, according to the Ethiopian government, existing colonial and national records. Placing much hope on the results of said map, Somali delegates in Addis Ababa at the time agreed to be part of the transitional government of Ethiopia headed by Meles Zenawi

The new map divided the country into several ethnic-based states. Among the major nationalities depicted in the map were Somalis, Afars, Oromos, Amharas, Tigres, Sidamas, and a host of other smaller groups. Out of this ethnic based regionalism, Western donor countries and the United States of America in particular expected that a new federal government of Ethiopia would emerge to fully move away from the long history of ethnic conflicts and wars that stunted any type of progress in the region. Now, after 13 years of constantly tampering with the spirit of the map, one is forced to feel uncertain about the goals of EPRDF versus Somalis in Ethiopia.



Since that map was adopted, Amharas and Tigres have by far shown a degree of satisfaction with the territories designated for them, notwithstanding some objections over the status of Humara and Silitumara, which should have been in the Amhara region. Both groups have strong membership in the EPRDF coalition.

On the other hand, the Oromos have always complained and felt that their demands were railroaded: They claim that they lost significant historical districts in what was previously known as Wallo, the home of Mohamed Ali. Mohammed Ali was the last Muslim Oromo to rule Wallo before Atse Towedros and emperor Menilik defeated him. Upon conquest, unlike Atse Towedros, who wanted to behead Mohammed Ali, emperor Menilik chose co-optation and decided that Mohammed Ali be spared and converted to Christianity. His name was consequently changed to Ras Michael. His Muslim son, the late Elias, was overthrown and let die in an underground cell to mark the end of Muslim/Oromo Wallo.

Other Oromo complaints included the loss of Finfine (Addis Abeba) to the federal government, plus several agriculturally rich districts in Gojam and Shoa. With Oromo nationalism on the surge, EPRDF leaders made all possible efforts to satisfy the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO), a junior member of the EPRDF coalition. EPRDF leaders also believe that significant concessions to OPDO is the only way to undermine the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) insurgency, while strengthening the position of its junior partner, OPDO. That strategy comes handy in this saying: “robbing Paul to pay Peter.”

Unfortunately, feeble Somalis have become the Paul of EPRDF's ever-shifting and deceitful politics. At the wake of drafting said map in 1991, Somalis chose, out of pragmatic concerns, to make real concessions and laid rest to a long standing claims on swats of districts in Hawaas (Awash) region. Soon after, Somalis were pushed away from and near Harar city, only to be followed by the redesignation of Diridhaba as a federal charter city. Today, Diridhaba has a

Tigre mayor and Somalis are far removed from the decision-making circle in this overwhelming Somali city. Somalis also lost many districts in what was formerly Bale and Sidamo (Nagele) provinces.

The Latest Punch

A plebiscite was conducted in October 2004 to determine the status of more Somali districts. The Somalis on the onset bitterly disputed the way the election was conducted and launched an official dispute. Among the grounds of dispute were: Oromos, who are members of the coalition of EPRDF, had their soldiers intimidate Somali voters at the polls. Also, Oromo/EPRDF representatives rigged and stole votes.

Paying deaf ear to the Somali case, on November 18, 2004, the Federal Government of Ethiopia has announced its decision of what it claimed to be a plebiscite. Such a decision has erroneously declared that several key districts in the Somali National State (Region 5) would be ceded to the Oromo Regional State (Region 4).

The result of the October plebiscite has been approved by the EPRDF/OPDO controlled House of Representatives which rubber stamps EPRDF agenda. This latest action of Ethiopia's legislative body cemented a process that has effectively resized Somali region: First, Somalis are made by design to cede regions in Hawaas, Bale, Negale as well as districts near the Dirir Dhaba - Addis railroad. And, on November 18, 2004, despite their objection over how the whole matter was handled by the government, Somalis are informed to cede the regions of Maeso, Bardoda, Baabili, Fanyaaniiro and Jinacsani to the Oromos.

As much as Aksum is a Tigre city or Dambidolo is an Oromo, Jinacsani, only 12 miles to the north of Jigjiga, is an important Somali city. Why such a city is ceded to the Oromos is a troubling move by EPRDF government, notwithstanding that this is said to be the ultimate price that EPRDF would pay to appease the Oromos .

Jesse Jackson, the African American civil rights leader, once told emotionally subdued black delegates in San Francisco that every body at the Convention got some thing out of the 1984 Democratic platform. To emphasize how much blacks lost grounds at the Convention, Jesse told his audience, "you aren't got nothing." Today, with similar emotions, one can lament to the Somalis in Ethiopia, "You ain't seen nothing yet."

A Tranquil Past Gives Way to the Unknown Future

If any civil strife arises in the future as a result of this sham plebiscite, especially between Harar and Jigjiga, EPRDF will conveniently blame it on what it calls the choice of the Jarso clan. For over two hundred years, Jarso, a Somali clan whose origin is of ancient Oromo/Somali mix has lived side by side with the Geri Koombo clan, the main inhabitants between Baabili and Jinacsani. (Other Somali clans that are affected in this latest resizing of the Somali region include Absame, Akisho, Bursuug of Issaq, Ciise, Gurgure, Hawle, Hawiye, and Sheekaash). According to Arif Ahmed's thesis on Geri and Jarso social contracts “ **Historical background of Geri and Jarso people and characteristic features**” Law Faculty, Addis Abeba University, these two clans together have drafted two hundred years-old complex and far-reaching social contracts to maximize peace and coexistence (see also Captain Sir Richard Burton, First Footsteps in East Africa). Through some unknown miracle, the Jarso clan in and around Feyanbiro and Janacsani has suddenly been delivered to the Oromos. EPRDF would like us to believe that with the Jarso goes the most important Somali land in Region 5. This defies any credible and rational public policy.

If Meles Zenawi approves the results of this sham and rigged plebiscite in the coming days, EPRDF can celebrate its “ *effective political skills* ” which significantly resized the Somali Regional State. And this would practically mean resizing Somali region and pushing its westerly boundaries down from

Hawaas and Harar, and then Dirir Dhabbe to Babile and now to Jinacsani in a matter of 13 years. What EPRDF has in store for the Somalis can only be surmised by saying: Somalis, "you ain't seen nothing, yet."

EPRDF leaders congratulate themselves and whisper that, under Meles Zenawi, a political strategy has been designed to disarm the hitherto insurgent Somalis to abandon much of their territorial belonging inside Ethiopia. Whether this would produce a lasting result or is merely a temporary gratification for the politics of Meles remains to be seen, lest history can barely be measured in years or decades.

With its feeble and docile transitional administration in Jigjiga, Somali society in Region 5 has been rendered toothless, and the community is being disoriented by clan cleavages. It has been effectively bifurcated exclusive entities with their own parochial interests to be easily contained east of Jigjiga. At the same time, Oromos have moved eastward and are now poised to administer Somali villages on the outskirts of Jigjiga.

It appears that Meles achieved all these without an effective regional government in place to represent the view point of Somalis. How else can any government close to the heart-beat of its people accept such a daytime land grabbing and expropriation of their own people? As such, one finds consolation in the belief that all the actions that EPRDF has so far taken against Somalis since 1991 are unilateral moves, which Somalis have the option not to honor. Somalis have not in the past honored top-down arrangements and they will not do so now.

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