Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. A comparative study of the Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz regions

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6 Federalism and Autonomy Conflicts in the Somali Region

6.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter gave a general background to the history and ethnic makeup of the study regions. In contrast, this chapter presents the impact of federal restructuring on intra and inter-clan relationships in the newly constituted Somali region. In fact, some of the theoretical propositions about the role of federalism in decentralising conflicts through 'proliferation of points of power,' outlined in chapter 2 appear to have been worked in the SNRS. In other words, federal restructuring by making resources such as political appointments, civil service jobs, regional/local budget and others available at local and regional levels impelled both intra and inter-clan contestations that often lead into violence. The division that emerged between the dominant Ogaden and the non-Ogadeni clans in the wake of ethnic regionalisation appeared to reduce possible threats from the Somali region to the political centre. However, inter-clan autonomy conflicts in the region are typically violent and localised.

One of the significant outcomes of federal restructuring in the SNRS has been the thickening of the conflict landscape in the region. In the past, the major conflict that gripped the region was the inter-state conflict between Ethiopia and neighbouring Somalia with the participation of insurgent movements such as the WSLF. Today, while there is still conflict between an ethnic insurgent movement (ONLF) and the government, there are several autonomy conflicts among Somali clans over a range of issues including land, administrative structures and others.

With this backdrop, this chapter sets out to examine the impacts of federal restructuring on conflicts in the Somali region from two broad angles. First, it considers the divisions/conflicts that emerged over the

politics of the new region at a regional level. Second, it considers two brief cases of autonomy conflicts between neighbouring clans.

6.2 Autonomy and Intra-regional Divisions

The creation of the Somali region in 1993 led to the emergence of intra and inter-clan divisions. Indeed, divisions emerged among Somali clans in the wake of the formation of the region on a number of issues such as the naming of the region, clan representation; the location of the regional capital and the region's political future (Markakis 1994, 1996; Samatar 2004; Hagmann 2005). There has been particularly discord between the dominant Ogaden clan and the non-Ogadeni clans. This seemed to have undermined ONLF's insurgency. So far, its armed rebellion is limited to the six Ogadeni inhabited *zones* of the SNRS. Moreover, the impact of autonomy in creating cleavages in the Somali region was not limited at the inter-clan level. It also contributed to the emergence of intra-clan conflicts particularly within the dominant Ogaden clan.

6.2.1 Cleavages between the Ogaden and the non-Ogadeni clans

After the change of government in 1991, a number of political organisations began to operate in the Somali region. These include the veteran WSLF, the Issa and Gurgura Liberation Front (IGLF), Horyal (Gadabursi clan organisation), the ONLF, the Al-Ittihad al-Islam and several smaller Somali political organisations.

The WSLF, IGLF and Horyal participated in the July 1991 peace and democracy conference. Indeed, the EPRDF sought the participation of the veteran Somali insurgent movement, the WSLF so strongly that it asked the help of the Sudanese to bring its leadership from Mogadishu to Addis Ababa (Samatar 2004: 1137). In spite of its sudden resuscitation with the help of the EPRDF, the WSLF never managed to emerge as a dominant player in the politics of the Somali region.

In contrast, the ONLF, established in the Middle East by exiled Ogadenis in 1984, received no official invitation to participate in the July conference. Discord marred early encounters between the ONLF and the EPRDF. The former's opposition to the deployment of EPRDF

troops in the region in the wake of the Derg's collapse in May 1991 particularly enraged the latter (Samatar 2004: 1136). In spite of this, the ONLF gained representation eventually in the CoR of the TGE on the ticket of the WSLF after the two organisations agreed to work together in July 1991.[1]

The other political organisation that emerged in the Somali region after the May 1991 regime change was the Al-Ittihad al-Islam (Islamic Unity). Al-Ittihad was a pan-Somali political organisation that sought to unite all Somalis of the Horn of Africa under an Islamic State. Within the Ethiopian Somali region, it was active among the Ogaden clan and seemed to have worked closely with the ONLF (Sage 2001; UNEUE 1995). The Al-Ittihad was accused of undertaking bombing attacks in Ethiopia in 1996 and 1997. Following these, the Ethiopian military crossed into southern Somalia on numerous occasions and neutralised Al-Ittihad's military wing (Sage 2001).

Among the several political forces, which began to operate in the new Somali region after 1991, the ONLF emerged as the dominant political organisation. It became the largest party within the interim Somali regional assembly after the December 1992 elections. Subsequently, it managed to establish the first regional government (Markakis 1996: 567). Its dominance in the regional government nevertheless ushered in one of the most important aspects of autonomy conflicts in the region, the cleavage between the dominant Ogaden clan and the non-Ogadeni clans.

In this respect, the founding conference of the new region, held in Dire Dawa towards the end of 1992, encountered two important controversial questions (Helander 1994). First, the naming of the region became divisive. The ONLF sought to name the region 'Ogadenia.' The non-Ogadeni clans, however, opposed this move (Markakis 1994b). As noted by the late Dr. Abdulmajid Hussein, the naming of the region where there are several Somali clans as 'Ogadenia' following the name of a single clan would have been divisive (Maleda 1993). Finally, the region was named as the Somali region.

This dispute was not a mere controversy on nomenclature. It showed the deep division that emerged between the dominant Ogaden and the non-Ogaden clans about their respective political roles and the very future of the region. Hence, the ONLF promoted the name Ogaden not only because it has wider recognition but also because of its aspiration to

establish an independent state under the same name (Ogaden Online 2001).

There was also controversy regarding the capital of the region. The regional assembly sought to declare Dire Dawa, a major city in eastern Ethiopia along the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway, the capital of the new region. However, because of the dispute over ownership of the city between the newly established Oromia and Somali regions, this became impossible (Asnake and Hussein 2007; Markakis 1996). Consequently, the ONLF promoted Gode remotely located in the southeastern part of the region as capital. Non-Ogaden clans who wished to make Jijiga the capital of the new region in turn opposed this move. Finally, Gode became the capital of the region (Markakis 1994b: 568). Yet in 1994, the capital was moved to Jijiga because of security problems that emerged in Gode after ONLF's fell out with the EPRDF.

The first president of the region was Abdullahi Mohammed Sa'adi from the ONLF. The majority of the executive committee members of the region during this period also came from the ONLF. The first regional government only managed to remain in office for a few months. The central government sacked the president and his executive officials in July 1993 because of alleged misappropriation of funds (Markakis 1994b; Samatar 2004). Since then, repetitive dismissal of regional presidents and their executives plague politics in the Somali region undermining stability. In fact, in ten years since the establishment of the region in 1992 eight presidents lost their positions.

The sacking of the first ONLF regional president by the EPRDF dominated central government strained relationships between the two organisations (Ogaden Online ND). Amid tension brewing between the Somali regional government and the central government, the ONLF dominated regional council in May 1994 called for a referendum for the secession of the region. The response of the EPRDF to this demand was swift and direct. It instructed the regional government to rescind what it called an illegal resolution. However, the regional parliament refused to carryout the instruction of the central government. The crisis finally culminated with the summary dismissal of the regional executive committee.

In sum, the formative period of the Somali region has shown one of the most important trends of autonomy conflicts, power struggle between the dominant Ogaden and the non-Ogadeni clans. Indeed, right after the inauguration of the new regional government dominated by the ONLF other Somali clans began to complain that they were not

adequately represented. As noted by John Markakis, 'the Ogaden control of the regional government united all the other clans in opposition' (1996: 567). Actually, the division between the Ogaden and the non-Ogaden about the ONLF and its objectives, which were somehow implicit in the past, became more explicit after the formation of the Somali region in 1992.

6.2.2 Rise and decline of the Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL)

The beginning of the 1990s in the SNRS saw the emergence of a dozen clan-based political parties. Political parties were established in the names of almost all of the major clans. Two interrelated factors may explain the proliferation of these parties. First, clans traditionally the most important socio-economic organs within Somali society became important instruments for political mobilisation. Second, the absence of a pan-Somali party that could represent all the clans seemed to have motivated almost all of the Somali clans to set up their own political parties.

Clan-based political parties that literally crowded the region were 'repacked' in 1994 when the ESDL was established by uniting 14 such parties. It is relevant to examine the motives behind the formation of the ESDL from two angles. The EPRDF, which intended to have a subordinate pan-Somali political party that would counter the ONLF, supported the formation of the ESDL. Similarly, non-Ogadeni politicians sought the unification of various clan parties as a way of countering the dominance of the ONLF. For instance, one Somali politician noted that the ESDL was established to resist the 'the undemocratic and aggressive tendency of the radical ONLF to dominate the administration and regional affairs' of the new Somali region (UNEUE 1995: 3). Hence, it is possible to view the ESDL as an attempt to 'fuse the interests of non-Ogadeni communities in Region 5' (Ibid).

Accordingly, in 1994 the ESDL came in to being after a meeting held in the Hurso military camp in eastern Ethiopia. Among those in attendance at this meeting was the then Prime Minster of the TGE, Tamrat Layne, who addressed the meeting. The late Dr. Abdulmajid

Hussein, then serving as a cabinet minister in the central government became chair of the new political party.

The name of the new party and its emblems brought together symbols from Ethiopia and Somalia. The new party borrowed the designation 'League' from the historic Somali Youth League (SYL), a pan-Somali organisation that played an important role in securing the independence of Somalia and the unification of the British and the Italian Somali colonies at the beginning of the 1960s. Moreover, a former activist of the SYL was appointed as honorary chair of the ESDL.[2] This gesture was to give the impression that the new party was a pan-Somali organisation as opposed to the ONLF. To show the new party's disassociation from the Greater Somalia ideology and to assure its willingness to work within the 'new' Ethiopia, it added Ethiopia in its nomenclature. Furthermore, the colours of the ESDL incorporated some of the national colours of Ethiopia and Somalia, showing, according to one of the founders, 'the possibility of bringing peace between the two countries.'[3]

With the strong support of the EPRDF, the ESDL won the first regional elections in 1995. It secured 75 seats out of the 139 available. ONLF's non-participation in these elections contributed to the victory of the ESDL. A faction of the ONLF that renounced violence, the 'legal ONLF' participated in the elections. It, however, only managed to get a few seats. Thus, the ESDL a few months after its formation emerged as a major player in regional politics. Its regional government established in 1995 appointed Iid Dahir (from the Ishak clan) president.

The ESDL, even if it received strong support from the EPRDF and initially from the non-Ogadeni clans failed to provide effective administration in the region because of a number of inter-related factors. It was fraught with internal divisions and lack of party discipline.[4] Because of this, no regular meetings of the different organs of the party and the regional parliament took place while it was in power (1995-1998) (Markakis 1996: 570). In fact, according to informants in Jijiga, the president of the SNRS during this period avoided convening regular sessions of the regional parliament for fear that, if the MPS were allowed to meet, they would have sacked him and his executives.[5]

Another accusation against ESDL was its failure to separate the Ogaden people from the insurgent ONLF. This seemed to have inadvertently expanded the support base of the ONLF.[6] The ESDL was not also successful in maintaining regional security. Indeed, many observers in the region noted that the authority and structures of the

regional government during this period (1995-1998) did not extend beyond the regional capital, Jijiga.[7]

The event that finally broke the ESDL happened in October 1998 when the regional executive committee attempted to remove Iid Dhair, the president of the region, from office. The federal government dubbed the decision as a *coup* and demanded the reinstallation of the beleaguered president (see Samatar 2004). Even if the regional parliament was not consulted about the sacking of the president, it refused to accept the pressure of the federal government. It instead decided to sack the president and the entire executive committee and elected a new president (Samatar 2004: 1145-6). The regional parliament elected Keder Ma'alin from the legal ONLF president. The election of Keder by the ESDL-dominated regional parliament gave the final blow to the fractured and divided ruling party.

6.2.3 Autonomy and intra-Ogaden divisions

Somali regional politics affected relations not only among the major clans but also within clans like the Ogaden. The first notable instance of this trend was observed within the ONLF at the beginning of the transition period. In this respect, the late leader of the ONLF, Sheik Ibrahim Abdalla was reluctant to accept Ethiopian sovereignty over the region and hence did not want to participate in the July 1991 conference, while the other leaders wanted to take part in the transitional process (Markakis 1996: 567). The division within the ONLF became even more serious after the ONLF-dominated regional assembly decided to hold a referendum on the region's future in 1994. Right after that decision, the central government began to intervene in the politics of the region more decisively. A faction of the ONLF also intensified its armed insurrection. At the same time, one faction of the ONLF, the 'legal ONLF' renounced armed insurgency and declared its willingness to work within the system.

The federal government in the hope of bringing things under control spearheaded the formation of a new party by merging the ESDL and the legal ONLF. The official reason for the formation of the Somali People Democratic Party (SPDP) according to the late Dr. Abdulmajid Hussein, who was the first chair of the party, was to bring unity among the different clans of the region (UNEUE 1998). However, the EPRDF

almost coerced the ESDL to merge with the legal ONLF because of its belief that accommodating the later within the regional government would undermine the activities of the ONLF.[8]

After the formation of the SPDP, Ogadeni politicians regained their prominence in regional politics. Yet, their pledge to bring security to the region did not materialise. In addition to the politicians of the region, Ogadeni elders were involved in several peacemaking activities such as the highly publicised Somali Peace and Unity Conference, which was held at Kebri Dahar in 1995 (UNEUE 1995). In a similar fashion, in 2005 the elders sought to mediate between the ONLF and the federal government. These mediation efforts have not been successful, as the parties to the conflict could not narrow their differences.

The continued insurgency of the ONLF has brought widespread insecurity in the Ogaden inhabited parts of the SNRS. For instance, any Ogadeni person suspected of having a relationship with the ONLF could face violations of his/her rights. Indeed, even those who work for the government could be accused of being anti-peace,[9] as there is a feeling among officials of the federal government that the administrative structures in the Somali region are widely infiltrated by the ONLF (Andinet 2004: 9).

Moreover, there is also a tendency among officials of the region to incriminate those individuals who, fail to follow the official line or with whom they have personal grudges as anti-peace and/ or *al-Ittihad*. The gravity of this problem was confirmed in 2003, when the SPDP decided to sack the then president of the region, Abdulrashid Dulane, because of his alleged weak position on the so-called anti-peace forces and advocates of the *Greater Somalia Outlook*[10] (Zemen 2003: 11). This shows that branding political competitors and rivals, as 'anti-peace' has been an important instrument in the ongoing internal infighting within the new political class in Jijiga. That is probably why the federal government appointed Abdulrashid Dulane vice minister a few days after his dismissal from Jijiga in 2003 and later in 2005/6 as Ethiopia's Ambassador to Japan.

The ongoing conflict between the ONLF and the government has been also internally divisive to the Ogaden. Hence, some Ogadeni support the government while others support the ONLF. This brought unprecedented divisions within the Ogaden, to the extent members of families torn between the government and the insurgents (Hagmann 2005: 525). More importantly, the government uses locally recruited Ogadeni militia to combat the rebels. This also further divided the

Ogaden. There are also accusations surrounding both the ONLF and the government regarding human rights violations. For instance, the former stands accused of attacking Somalis who work for the government and any other highlander[11] who happens to be in the countryside of the region (Ibid). On the other hand, the troops of the government and the militia have been accused of human rights violations ranging from arbitrary arrests to killings (Khalif and Doornbos 2002: 74). Since, Ethiopia's intervention in Somalia in December 2006, the conflict in the Ogaden inhabited parts of the SNRS intensified. The Ethiopian government particularly intensified its military campaigns in the region after ONLF insurgents attacked a Chinese-run oil exploration camp and killed five Chinese and 70 Ethiopian workers in April 2007. Several reports indicate the intensification of the conflict and worsening humanitarian problems in the region. Presently, amid increasing accusations that the government is involved in human rights violations much of the Ogadeni inhabited parts of the Somali region remain inaccessible to international media and aid agencies (Cawthrone 2007; Heally 2007; HRW 2008).

6.2.4 Autonomy and cross-clan cleavages

The dominant approach to the study of the politics of the Somali region has been the examination of clan divisions and alliances. While clan-based politics is still central to the region, some other political cleavages have also emerged. These are mainly outcomes of asymmetrical centre-regional relations. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that they would develop into non-violent ideological conflicts.

Cross-clan cleavages that emerged in the Somali region could be examined from two angles. First, there is competition for power in the region between the *tataki*[12] and the *civil service*[13]groups. The *tataki* refers to those regional and local officials of the SNRS promoted to positions of authority because of the support they received from the federal army deployed throughout the region.[14] The army supports the *tataki* because of their service in the former's ongoing anti-insurgency efforts in the region. Hence, over the last ten years, some prominent *tataki* assumed important positions within the SNRS.[15] It is widely alleged in Jijiga that whenever a challenge arises to the position of the *tataki*, military officials

intervene on their behalf (Hagmann 2005). The *tataki* themselves are accused of branding their competitors as 'anti-peace' to put them out of competition.[16]

The *civil service* refers to those young Somalis trained in the Ethiopian Civil Service College (ECSC)[17] or other colleges and universities in Ethiopia particularly after 1991. Some portray this group as a cluster of young intellectuals dissatisfied by the divisive clan politics and seek to transform the region by applying their knowledge and skills. More importantly, this group embraces the new federal system and is sympathetic to the authorities of the federal government (Hagmann 2005: 525-6).

Officials of the MoFedA and EPRDF field cadres[18] assigned to the region as advisors mainly promoted the *civil service* group. As these advisors were the real power brokers within the region, the *civil service* utilised their support to attain high offices within the regional government. The fact that many of the field cadres and the members of the *civil service* were former students of the ECSC helped the latter's quick rise in the structures of the regional government. As one observer noted, 'the field cadres of the EPRDF and the officials of the MoFedA seemed to have more trust in the members of the *civil service* than others.'[19] Indeed, some prominent members of this group received appointments to their lucrative positions even before they completed their studies at the ECSC.

For some regional observers, the division between the *tataki* and the *civil service* is just a mirage, as both groups would finally merge into their clan boxes.[20] Others, in contrast, suggest that all of the officials of the region, both the *tataki* and the *civil service,* would stay in power so long as they managed to gain support from their patrons in Addis Ababa. Hence, these groups do not have a social base in the region.[21] As a result, both groups only compete for the favour and attention of the central authorities, not to promote the interest of the people of the region.[22]

The second factor that appears to have a cross-clan character has been the issue of the so-called *Greater Somalia Outlook*. Upon the establishment of the SNRS in 1992, individuals who were officials of the neighbouring Somalia took almost all of the key positions of the region. As part of its unification struggle, Somalia followed a policy of providing its citizenship to all ethnic Somalis. Hence, the government of Somalia considered many Somalis who went from Ethiopia to Somalia as its own citizens. Some even became civil and military officials.

The EPRDF initially allowed the political ascendancy of these former officials of the Somalia government essentially for two reasons. First, because of the shortage of trained and experienced personnel to fill the vacancies created in the new region. Second, the EPRDF was more positively inclined to those who opposed the previous regime than those who worked for the former military government. This caused the marginalisation of the few educated Somali who had worked under the Derg. For instance, one former Somali *awraja* administrator under the Derg remarked that 'during the formative years of the region, the foreigners came here and assumed power and they made us outsiders in our own country.'[23]

However, in the past few years the federal government spearheaded the criminalisation of the *Greater Somalia Outlook* and the removal of former officials of Somalia from positions of authority. The feeling in Addis Ababa that the SNRS became politically unstable and suffered from chronic corruption because of bad influences brought by former officials of Somalia contributed to this move.[24] Moreover, both the *tataki* and the *civil service* used the criminalisation of those who worked in Somalia in order to consolidate their role in the region. In fact, some accuse the *tataki* of aggressively pursuing this agenda so that some of their competitors in the regional government would be out of service.[25]

After the criminalisation of the *Greater Somalia Outlook*, Ethiopian Somalis who worked for the government of Somalia as military and intelligence officers, cadres of the then ruling party of Somalia and diplomats were prohibited membership at the SPDP and from assuming political positions in the region (Andinet 2004: 13). As a result, many officials who were accused of working for the Somalia government lost their positions. Within the SNRS, this decision appeared to be divisive and remains unpopular (Samatar 2004: 1147). Moreover, the decision to outlaw those who worked for the government of Somalia was applied selectively. For instance, some informants allege such top officials of the region as Mohamoud Drir[26] and Abdulrashid Dulane[27] who were at the forefront of criminalising the *Greater Somalia Outlook*, were themselves involved in it.[28] Critics within the region also underline that the decision made to isolate those who worked for the former Somalia government was not only an illegal infringement on the citizenship rights of the concerned individuals but also divided the people of the region.[29]

6.3 Autonomy Conflicts: Clans and the New Federal Resources

One of the impacts of federal restructuring in the Somali region has been the emergence of clan autonomy conflicts. These refer to those conflicts that emerged after the formation of the region over such issues as control of administrative structures such as *kebele* and *woreda*, clan representation, identity and others. In fact, clan autonomy conflicts are distinct from the more amenable traditional conflicts over water and pasture. That is why officials of the Somali region call such conflicts as 'political conflicts' as opposed to traditional clan conflicts over land resources (SPDP 2005).

Lack of congruence between the geographic jurisdiction of *woreda* and *kebele* with clan boundaries is one of the main reasons that causes clan autonomy conflicts in the region. In other words, failure to ensure fair representation for all the clans within administrative organs ranging from *kebele* to the regional council causes conflicts. Exacerbating the problem further is the fact that Somali clans who have numerical superiority at *kebele* and *woreda* levels tend to claim such administrative structures as if they were exclusively theirs (Mohamoud 2004). In order to discuss this problem, what follows considers two brief cases.

6.3.1 Identity, autonomy and Bantu minorities

The ethnic identity of the Somali for a long time has been presented as homogenous, despite divisions within the Somali society particularly between the 'noble' nomadic pastoralists and the Bantu farmers.[30] The well-documented narrative regarding the relationship between the nomadic Somali and the sedentary Bantu clans in Somalia by several researchers seems to be valid in the Ethiopian case as well (Besteman 1995; Cassanelli 1995, 2000). In other words, like their brethren in Somalia, the nomadic pastoralist Somali clans in the SNRS look down on their Bantu neighbours because of their darker colour complexion and mode of livelihood.

In fact, the designation Bantu itself has been historically applied to 'individuals who are presumed to have come from east Africa, and it usually [connotes] slave origins and low status' (Cassanelli 1995: 4). But in recent years the term 'acquired a more positive political content as it

has been taken up by the Bantu Somalis' in order to press for their political demands (Ibid). The transformation of this otherwise derogatory term for the sake of political mobilisation has also occurred in Ethiopia in the context of the autonomy politics of the Somali region. Hence, some ethnic entrepreneurs of the minority Bantu clans not only underscore their shared plight of 'ethnic discrimination' at the hands of the dominant pastoral clans but also employ the term Bantu as a non-derogatory common designation.[31] Some even use such physical features as 'curled haired' as a collective nomenclature for the Bantu minorities as opposed to 'smoothed haired' pastoral clans.[32]

The Bantu clans within the SNRS are found along the banks of some of the major rivers that flow into the region such as the Genale, Dawa and Wabi-Shebelle. They include the Rer-Barre, the Dubbe and the Gerri-Marro. Although these groups share similarities in terms of their physical features and mode of livelihood (farming on riverbanks), they have differences in languages. They also neighbour different dominant pastoralist Somali clans. In this respect, while the Rer-Barre and the Dubbe neighbour with the Ogaden and other Somali clans, the Gerri-Marro are located coterminous with the Degodia clan. Among the Bantu clans that exist within the SNRS, the Rer-Barre is relatively the largest one. They are found in some five *woreda* of the SNRS – Kelafo, Mustahil, Fer-Fer and East and West Imi. The Dubbe, in contrast, are in the West and East Imi *woreda* of the SNRS and in several *woreda* of the neighbouring Oromia region. The Gerri-Marro, are located in the Dollo-Oddo and Dollo-Bay *woreda* of SNRS on the banks of the Dawa and Genale rivers. What follows is a brief discussion of the impact of federal restructuring on the inter-clan relationships of the Bantu and the nomadic clans by taking the cases of the Dubbe and the Rer-Barre clans.

The restructuring of the country into an ethnic federation transformed the relationship between the Bantu minority clans and their dominant pastoralist neighbours. This process has had different outcomes for the two groups. Ethnic entrepreneurs of the Rer-Barre and the Dubbe claim that federalism that was established with the objective of bringing equality and justice had lost its objectives when it came to mediating their relationship with the dominant pastoral clans. The new system instead of bringing equality, the Bantu claim, institutionalised the historic inequality that prevails between them and the pastoral clans (Hassen 2001).

It is possible to view the resentment of the Bantu clans from two inter-related angles. First, the ethnic entrepreneurs of the two groups (Dubbe and Rer-Barre), largely drawn from retired local officials and traditional clan leaders maintain that their groups were not allowed to share the political and economic dividends that the new federal system brought to the Somali region. They in particular underscore that despite the heavy emphasis on clan representation within the structures of the regional government, the Bantu were excluded from higher executive appointments (Abdulkeni 2003; Hassen 2001). The Bantu complain that even in those *woreda* where they are the majority they have neither proportional representation nor employment opportunities. They particularly resent the recruitment of civil servants and police officers to the *woreda* where they claim to be in the majority from the pastoral clans (Ibid).

Second, Bantu ethnic entrepreneurs reveal their wariness about the looming danger of losing their farming land to their nomadic neighbours. In this respect, they argue that unless they receive adequate and proper political representation within the region, the nomadic clans who in the past were averse to sedentary agriculture would undermine their position in the fertile riverbanks of the region as they are presently increasingly engaged in irrigated agriculture (Hassen 2001). In fact, in 1992 a few months after the collapse of the previous military government, the Rer-Barre lost some of their agricultural settlements around Kelafo because of a conflict with some Ogadeni clans. Because of this conflict, many lives were lost and about four dozen Rer-Barre villages burned down causing massive displacement (Brabant 1994: 13; Farah 1995: 4).

Bantu resentment about their dominant neighbours particularly (the Ogaden and its sub-clans) in the post-federal period are reinforced by narratives of identity and history that amplify differences between the two groups. Some Bantu ethnic entrepreneurs emphasise the ethnic otherness of their group from the nomadic Somali clans such as the Ogaden. For instance, in one of their petition letters to the federal government, Dubbe activists bluntly stated, 'Starting from time immemorial, as we the Dubbe and the Ogaden have conflicts, we had never been put into a single administration. We are different in ethnic descent, language, culture, outlook and livelihood' (Hassen 2001: 2). The above statement shows the extent to which Dubbe ethnic entrepreneurs want to travel in order to show their ethnic otherness from the Somali/Ogaden. More importantly, it demonstrates one of the

inadequacies of using ethnicity alone as an organising device for political representation and territorial organisation of Ethiopia's ethnic federation. In a similar fashion, the ethnic entrepreneurs of the Rer-Barre underscore their ethnic otherness from the 'noble' Somali pastoralist clans. They reiterate that the Ogaden do not only consider the 'curled haired' Rer-Barre as racially inferior but also until recently eschewed intermarriage with them.[33]

The activists of both groups underscore that they had no history of rebellion. In the present parlance of political branding in Ethiopia, Bantu ethnic entrepreneurs underscore that they do not engage in 'anti-peace' activities. In contrast, they accuse their local rivals – the Ogaden – of having close ties with the ongoing armed insurgency of the ONLF. Of course, such accusations are intended to garner the support of the political centre in the ongoing political competition (autonomy conflict) between the two groups at local and regional levels.

Despite similar grievances echoed by the leaders of the Dubbe and the Rer-Barre, the two groups pursued different strategies to ensure what they believe are the rights of their clans. Political activists of the Dubbe followed a strategy that puts greater emphasis on their separate ethnic identity from both the Oromo and the Somali in whose regions they are located.

Thus, since March 2001, their ethnic entrepreneurs have been engaged in a struggle aimed at ensuring recognition of a separate ethnic identity for their group from both the Somali and the Oromo. Accordingly, they argue that as their ethnic group speaks its own language, has its own territory and a common psychology, it fulfils the criteria set for recognising 'nations, nationalities and peoples' by the federal constitution (Abdulkeni 2003; Hassen 2001). They argue that they should be provided the right of self-determination. For instance, in one of their petitions to the federal government, the Dubbe underscored that they were discriminated based on their race (Hassen 2001: 1-2):

> Ethiopian nations, nationalities and peoples are now benefiting from the rights, which have been enshrined in the constitution. They are now administering themselves from the *kebele* to the federal level by electing their representatives. This has not been, however, the case for the Dubbe nationality. We have been denied our rights and dominated by bigger nationalities of the Oromo and the Somali. In addition to this, we are facing racial discrimination.

In their pursuit of securing government recognition of a separate ethnic identity, the Dubbe sought to make use of the constitutional provision (art. 47) that provides the internal secession of distinct ethnic groups to establish their own federating unit through the organisation of a plebiscite. Thus, they were engaged in continuous effort of writing petitions and collecting signatures of the members of their clan to persuade regional and federal authorities to allow a referendum. This persistent demand has not so far elicited support from the EPRDF that controls the federal government's instruments of ethnic codification and regulation. It, nonetheless, has adversely influenced the relationships between the Dubbe and their Somali neighbours.

In contrast to the Dubbe, Rer-Barre ethnic entrepreneurs sought the provision of 'equitable' representation for their clan without questioning their Somali identity. They, therefore, sought an important role for their clan in the three *woreda*, Kelafo, Mustahil and Fer-Fer where they claim the majority and fair representation at the regional level. To this end, starting from the initial years of the transition, Rer-Barre activists engaged in forming political parties in order to ensure their just representation in the regional government. Hence, they established the Rer-Bare People's Party (RBPP) in 1991. According to one of their leaders, the RBPP came about because of the clan's desire to protect itself from the oppression of the bigger clans, particularly the Ogaden.[34] Because of their establishment of a party, the Rer-Barre managed to get representation at the central and executive committees of the former regional ruling party, the ESDL. To their dismay, since the merger of the ESDL with the legal ONLF in 1998 to form the SPDP their clan does not have representation in the central and executive committees of the regional ruling party. In this respect, Ugaz Abdigaz noted (1998:1-2):

> Even if the Rer-Barre people were one of the Somali clans who happily welcomed the merger of the ONLF and the ESDL, when changes were made to the regional government, and new executive committee members and bureau heads were assigned on the basis of clan distribution after the formation of the SPDP, there was no allocation to our clan. This is despite the provision of important offices for such smaller clans like the Rer-Aw Hassen, Sherif, Sheikash, Merihan, and others.

Following their disillusionment with the SPDP, some of the political leaders of the Rer-Barre who recognised the utility of a political party to

their struggle established the Dil Wabi People's Democratic Movement (DWPDM) in April 2004 with a broader agenda of working not only for the Rer-Barre, but also for the other Bantu clans. As one of the party officials noted:

> We seek self-administration for the curled hair people [the Bantu] who have settled on the riverbanks of the four major rivers in our region. We wish to have an administrative structure, which includes the Rer-Barre, Dubbe and Gerri-Marro. We strive to have a special self- administrative structure like the Silte *zone*, which was separated from the Gurage *zone* of the Southern region through a plebiscite.[35]

Thus after the formation of the DWPDM, the leaders of the Dubbe and the Rer-Barre clans for the first time began to advocate collectively for the formation of a special administrative structure for the Bantu clans within the SNRS. Still, the regional authorities of the SNRS have not positively considered these demands, apparently because the view that such recognition of diversity within the region would undermine Somali unity. Hence, an official of the ruling regional party remarked that:

> The Rer-Barre and Dubbe only emotionally established a political party. Their position could endanger the unity of the Somali people. Their allegation that in the *woreda* where they are the majority, members of other clans were given political appointments is a right one; the SPDP tries to resolve this problem in the future. We will ensure their fair representation in their localities and at the regional level.[36]

The officials of the SNRS, moreover, appear to be lukewarm to this demand because of the precedent it would create for other clans.

6.3.2 Sheikash quest for self-administrative structure

The conflict between the Sheikash clan and some sub-clans of the Ogaden over such issues as representation and control of local administrative structures led to the death of hundreds and displacement of thousands of people. The conflict is indeed one of the worst autonomy conflicts in the Somali region.

The Sheikash are traditionally engaged in Koranic teaching. They together with such other priestly clans as Gatson, Awhassen and Sherif are collectively called Aw.[37] They are widely dispersed among the different Somali clans in both Somalia and the Ethiopian Somali region. Even if Sheikash informants underscore that the self-name of their clan is Fiq-Omer, the clan is widely known as Sheikash. According to oral traditions, the ancestors of the clan came from Arabia to preach Islam.[38] Moreover, like the other Aw clans such as the Sherif, the Sheikash are separate from the clan structure of the Somali and do not have a traditional claim to a specific territory.

Because of their religious services, the Sheikash used to have good relationships with the other clans including the Ogaden within which they were located. For instance, they used to be referred as a peaceful clan because of their involvement in peacemaking activities.[39] As peacemakers and mediators, the Sheikash had a neutral status in traditional Somali clan conflicts over land resources so that conflicting clans would not loot their livestock, which bore special marks. Moreover, they would cross the territories of the conflicting parties for both trading and religious pilgrimage. There are also inter-marriages between the Sheikash and the other Somali clans like the Ogaden.[40]

After the formation of the Somali region in 1992, the relationship between the Ogaden and the Sheikash began to change dramatically. This was particularly because of the need for 'the Somali clans to associate themselves to an area where they principally are settled… to claim the right to be represented within the Somali regional parliament' (Guinand 2001: 13) and perhaps to set up their own *woreda* administration. The autonomy politics of the Somali region brought unprecedented challenges to the Sheikash who are widely scattered among major Somali clans like the Ogaden and do not have exclusive control over territory. Furthermore, the formation of the Sheikash People Democratic Movement (SPDM) in 1992 and its eventual inclusion in the ESDL that was formed to counter the alleged hegemony of the ONLF contributed to the decline in the relationship between the two groups. In fact, Sheikash informants remarked that the ONLF resisted the opening of SPDM's offices in the Ogaden inhabited *woreda* of the region.[41]

The disagreement between the Sheikash and the Ogaden over such issues as control over local administrative structures and representation led to a violent conflict between the two groups particularly starting from the mid of the 1990s. In the words of one informant, 'when

democracy came, the Sheikash who were religious teachers wanted their own *woreda* and when they were prohibited that by the Ogaden that led to a conflict between the two groups.'[42] The Ogaden rejected the demand by saying, 'on whose territory are the Sheikash going to be elected and form their own *woreda.*'[43] Sheikash activists also allege that in addition to the question of control of territory and representation, they became targets of the ONLF and the Al-Ittihad, which they contend work together, because of their refusal to accept the Al-Ittihad version of 'fundamentalist Islam' and their opposition to the separatist policy of the ONLF.[44]

While the Sheikash emphasise the issue of lack of representation for them as the major source of the ongoing conflict between the two groups, Ogaden informants underline that the issue of representation was exaggerated pointing out that some Sheikash were represented at both local and regional levels.[45] However, another Ogaden informant notes that the Sheikash did not possess adequate representation in Ogadeni dominated *woreda* councils.[46]

As the conflict between the two groups festered for several years with no long-lasting solution in sight, in 1998 Sheikash activists reportedly deliberated on three options: (a) to continue their resistance against Ogaden dominance and ensure their rights to self-administration within the Ogaden inhabited *woreda*; (b) accept the status quo and live under the domination of the Ogaden; and (c) to leave the Ogaden territories and settle somewhere they could live in peace and ensure their right to self-administration (Muhammad 2004). Reportedly, in a major meeting held at Marameit in the Garbo *woreda* of the Fiq *zone* in June 1998, the representatives of the clan decided against the first two options – continuation of Sheikash's resistance and accepting the dominance of the Ogaden. Thus, the meeting accepted the last option – leaving Ogaden dominated territories (Ibid).

Ogaden informants nevertheless underscore that the decision to migrate came because of the aspiration of the leaders of the Sheikash to have their own *woreda,* not because of lack of representation.[47] One Ogaden informant even goes further and alleges that the decision to emigrate and establish a Sheikash settlement was made by a trans-national Sheikash organisation operating from Saudi Arabia and Mogadishu involving not only the Sheikash in Ethiopia but also in Somalia.[48]

In accordance with the decision to migrate, starting from April 2001 the Sheikash organised waves of migration. Initially, the migrants assembled at a transit point called Janu-Gaben near Denan (Guinand 2001). Thousands of people migrated crossing the Genale River to the remote south-eastern *woreda* of West Imi in the Afder *zone* of the SNRS that borders with the Oromia region in the former Bale province.

The Sheikash managed to establish their new settlement at Rasso where one of their sub-clans was already living peacefully together with its non-Ogadeni neighbours such as Raitu and Dawe of Oromo origin, Gadsan, Karanle, Garire and Gurra of Somali origin (Guinand 2001). Initially, there was no confrontation between the Sheikash and the earlier inhabitants. Sheikash ethnic entrepreneurs even suggested that the leaders of the earlier inhabitants of the area blessed their settlement in the area. Some observers at Rasso dispute this, however.[49]

After a brief calm at their new settlement, another round of conflict began between the Sheikash and another sub-clan of the Ogaden, Mohammed Zubber/ Rer-Abdille. There are conflicting accounts about the cause of the new round of conflicts. According to Sheikash informants, the Rer-Abdille clan began the conflict not because of their infringement of its territory but because of political mobilisation by Ogaden politicians who orchestrated a common anti-Sheikash stance in order to dislodge them from their new settlement.[50] The Sheikash furthermore accuse Ogadeni officials of the SNRS of allowing their rival Ogadeni clan to use government resources such as weapons, ammunition and vehicles against them (Muhammad 2004).

Other informants claim that the Ogaden clan, now locked in a conflict with the Sheikash, has been affected by the new settlement that the latter created in Rasso, and dismiss the claim that there was anti-Sheikash mobilisation by Ogadeni politicians.[51] In the conflict between the two groups, several lives were lost and properties destroyed. Still the Sheikash, now assembled at one place not only managed to withstand the attack but also launched a counteroffensive against their rival clan.[52]

After a fragile stabilisation of the situation in the Rasso area, Sheikash political activists are now engaged in an interesting political struggle to legalise their new territorial possession. For instance, in one of the long petition letters they wrote to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, they pleaded for: 'permission for those Sheikash who remain within the Ogaden to migrate to Rasso; provision of security; and the formation of a self-administrative structure (*woreda*)' (Muhammad 2004: 10-11).

Despite the severity of the conflict between the Sheikash and some Ogadeni sub-clans over the last few years, both the regional and the federal government did not take any substantial measure that would provide a sustainable solution to the conflict.

6.4 Conclusion

The Somali region has been a scene of protracted conflict ever since its incorporation into the Ethiopian State at the end of the 19th century. This chapter shown how Ethiopian federalism faced difficulties in delivering its main objectives of ending secessionist wars and providing ethnic autonomy.

First, there is an ongoing controversy regarding the relationship between secession and federalism as witnessed from the experience of the Somali region. The views of scholars on the subject are of course mixed. Some scholars like Donald Horowitz suggest that federalism could be territorially organised by avoiding congruence between ethnic and intra-federal boundaries in order to reduce ethnic conflicts and secessionism (1985). In contrast, such liberal thinkers as Will Kymlicka argue that federations work better when they recognise the rights of minorities to break away through democratic means (2004a). From these contending views, interestingly Ethiopia's constitutional and political rhetoric approximates Will Kymlicka's position. As mentioned in chapter 2, secession has been recognised as unconditional rights of Ethiopia's ethnic groups. The practice is, however, far from the theory. For instance, the decision of the ONLF dominated Somali regional parliament to call for a referendum on the independence of the region did not lead to democratic negotiation. It instead heralded the beginning of a conflict between an ethnic insurgent movement and the government. Hence, the EPRDF today like its predecessor battles against armed secessionist movements such as the OLF and ONLF.

Second, as precisely noted by Donald Horowitz, federalism tends to move the arena of conflict from the political centre to the regions by proliferating the points of power. Such decentralisation of conflicts could be useful, if the resultant conflict is largely ideological and non-violent (Gagnon 1993: 23; Smith 1995b: 16-17). In the Somali case, although the region is more ethnically homogenous than the other

regions, the clans play the role of ethnic groups. In fact, autonomy has led to the emergence of what Somali officials call political conflicts that are clearly different from traditional pastoral conflicts over land resources. For instance, the demand of the Sheikash for *woreda* status led to violent and protracted conflict. Like the other regions of the country, ethnic federalism also led to the re-examination of ethnic identity. Hence, the ethnic entrepreneurs of the Bantu clans of the Dubbe and Rer Barre sought to use ethnic otherness as a way of ensuring better entitlement.

Ethnic federalism also brought cleavages between the dominant Ogaden and the non-Ogadeni clans and between the *tataki* and the *civil service*. If these cleavages were ideologically inspired and non-violent, they could have been positive outcomes of the federal restructuring process. However, as they were violent and influenced by asymmetric centre-regional relationships, they do not have a role in pacifying inter-clan and centre-regional relations. In sum, in spite of the linguistic and cultural autonomy that ethnic federalism provided to the Somali region, the system apparently failed to achieve its stated objectives – to bring peace through a firm commitment to self-determination (or regional autonomy).

The next chapter discusses the impacts of federal restructuring on conflicts in the Benishangul-Gumuz region.

Notes

[1] Personal interview: Former *Woreda* administrator and founding member of the ESDL, 7 January and 25 January 2005, Jijiga.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Personal Interview: Deputy Speaker, Somali Regional Parliament, 15 December 2004, Jijiga.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Personal Interview: Former *Woreda* administrator and founding member of the ESDL, 7 January and 25 January 2005, Jijiga.

[9] The phrase 'anti-peace' is used as code word to incriminate anyone within the Somali region as having collaborated with the ONLF or being less tough on them.

[10] *Greater Somalia Outlook* in the context of the Somali region refers to those individuals who worked for the realisation of the goal of uniting all Somali inhabited territories under Somalia.

[11] 'Highlander' or 'Amhara' in the context of the Somali region broadly refers to non-Somali Ethiopians found in the region but are originally from the central and northern highlands of Ethiopia.

[12] The word *Tataki* is an Amharic word that literally means a 'rifleman.' In the context of the Somali region, it refers to individuals armed by the government to stabilise the region after the collapse of the previous military regime in 1991. It also applies to the new members of the regional militia.

[13] In the context of the Somali region, the *Civil Service* refers to graduates of the Ethiopian Civil Service College (ECSC) and other universities and colleges.

[14] Focus Group Discussion: Jijiga elders, 7 January 2005.

[15] Personal Interview: Young intellectual, 9 November 2004.

[16] Ibid.

[17] The Ethiopian Civil Service College (ECSC), established in 1995 to provide certificate and degree courses to selected cadres of the ruling party and its affiliates with the purpose that they fill up the new political and administrative vacancies created at local and regional levels.

[18] The term 'field cadres' refers to those cadres of the ruling party (EPRDF) who were assigned to the regions as advisors but were actually in charge of overseeing regional officials. This supervisory role of the federal government in the regions was restructured after the split that occurred in the ranks of the TPLF, which remains the dominant force within the ruling EPRDF in 2000.

[19] Personal Interview: Ugaz and Somali Member of Parliament, 8 and 21 December 2004.

[20] Personal Interview: Somali Region High Court Judge, 21 December 2004.

[21] Focus Group Discussion: Jijiga elders, 7 January 2005.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Focus Group Discussion: Jijiga elders, 7 January 2005.

[24] Personal Interview: Former vice president of the Somali region and Somali regional parliament member, 16 January 2005.

[25] Focus Group Discussion: Jijiga elders, 7 January 2005.

[26]Mohamoud Drir was president of the ruling regional party, SPDP, and presently a cabinet minister in the federal government.

[27] Abdulrashid Dulane was president of the region, Vice Minister at the federal level and currently Ethiopian Ambassador to Japan.

[28] Personal Interview: Former *Woreda* administrator and founding member of the ESDL, 7 January and 25 January 2005, Jijiga.

[29] Personal Interview: Civil servant and resident of Jijiga, 13 January 2005.

[30] In addition to the division of Somalis into major clan families, according to I.M. Lewis, there are a number of smaller ethnic communities within the Somali society, these include the Somalised Bantu 'who are scattered in cultivating villages… along the Shebelle and Juba Rivers. These derive in part from earlier Bantu and Swahili speaking groups, as well as from former slave populations freed by the suppression of slavery at the end of the nineteenth century. Although they retain today much of their physical distinctiveness, socially these communities are becoming increasingly absorbed in the wider Somali society' (Lewis 2002: 4).

[31] See (Jamal ND).

[32] Personal Interview: Chairman of DWPDM, 6 February 2005, Jijiga.

[33] Personal Interview: Rer-Barre elder, 7 February 2005, Jijiga.

[34] Personal Interview: Chairman of DWPDM, 6 February 2005, Jijiga

[35] Ibid.

[36] Personal Interview: Expert, Regional Coordination Office for Administration and Security, 14 December 2004, Jijiga.

[37] Personal Interview: Elder of Bertre. Jijiga: 18 January 2005.

[38] Focus Group Discussion: Sheikash elders, 29 December 2004.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Personal Interview: Expert, Regional Civil Service Commission, 14 December 2004.

[42] Personal Interview: Ogadeni official at SNRS Bureau for Militia. Jijiga, 15 December 2004.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Personal Interview: Sheikash Lawyer, 13 January 2005.

[45] Personal Interview: Former Ogadeni high official of the Somali region, 30 January and 5 February 2005, Jijiga.

[46] Personal Interview: Former high official and member of Somali regional parliament, 16 January 2005.

[47] Personal Interview: Former high official of the Somali region, 30 January and 5 February 2005, Jijiga.

[48] Personal Interview: Former high official and member of Somali regional parliament, 16 January 2005.

[49] Personal Interview: Ugaz of Afgab and Administrator of Afder zone, 25 January 2005.

[50] Focus Group Discussion: Sheikash elders, 29 December 2004.

[51] Personal Interview: Former high official of the Somali region, 16 January 2005.

[52] Focus Group Discussion: Sheikash elders, 29 December 2004.