On January 15, 2016, about 209 Kenyan troops posted at the El Adde military camp in Somalia were rattled by sounds of gunfire followed shortly by a large explosion. It immediately dawned on the soldiers that they were under attack by a special contingent of Al Shabaab’s infantry specializing in mass raids against isolated Amisom (African Union Mission in Somalia) bases. This was the Al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist organisation’s most deadly attack against an Amisom base.

The initial shots in the pre-dawn attack were fired by a Kenyan sentry manning a machine gun post. He was shooting towards an approaching SVBIED (suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device – basically a car bomb being driven by a suicide bomber). The suicide bomber behind the wheel was a man called Abdul Qadir Ahmad Ali (nicknamed Farhan by his fellow terrorists). The gunshots did not stop the vehicle; the SVBIED ended up exploding inside the base. The first blast from the explosion incinerated everything within the vicinity, while the second blast wave ricocheted around the adjacent tents, knocking some soldiers unconscious.

The base hosted Kenya Defence Force (KDF) troops from the 9th Rifle Battalion and a few soldiers from the 5th Kenya Rifles. A day earlier, Somalia National Army (SNA) troops had vacated the adjacent base over fears of being attacked by Al Shabaab which suggested that the Kenyans were aware of an impending raid. However, their defence preparations were not well thought-out, so when the infantry from the Saleh Nabhan battalion attacked, they were met with a disorganised response, with some soldiers trying to flee and others taking cover. The attackers also appeared confused during their raid. This is what makes the fall of El Adde so perplexing and tragic.
A propaganda documentary released on April 10, 2016 by Al Shabaab showed a highly edited version of the events that occurred on that fateful day. The video showed that most of the Kenyan soldiers that fell were in their full combat gear, a clear indication that they suspected that an attack was imminent and had prepared for it. However, they appeared surprised by the scale of the attack; some even ran away and were later rescued after they reached Mandera County in Kenya.

To date, neither Amisom nor the Kenyan government nor the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) have published an official death toll from the El Adde attack. Yet it was recognized internationally as one of the greatest military disasters to befall a peacekeeping mission in a single day. CNN even labeled it as a military massacre that was being covered-up by the Kenyan regime. American military officials were also shocked by the scale of defeat that KDF suffered, while a Kenyan official stated that Al Shabaab had done good reconnaissance on the base before attacking it.

A FRAGMENTED FORCE

Amisom was established in January 2007 by the African Union as a peace-support mission to protect the fledgling government in Mogadishu from the preeminent peace spoiler in Somalia, Al Shabaab. However, to date, Al Shabaab still retains formidable offensive capabilities despite losing considerable amounts of territory. This raises the question of whether there is a disconnect between Amisom’s mandate and the reality on the ground?

According to its official profile, Amisom was originally conceived as a transitory UN-backed peace support mission mandated to promote national dialogue and reconciliation, as well as to create a secure environment that would facilitate humanitarian operations. However, from an initial deployment of 1,500 Ugandan troops in 2007, it has grown into the AU’s largest multidimensional peace-support operation, with over 22,000 troops, as well as police and civilian components.

Neopatrimony rarely values meritocracy and competence in military matters; it’s only loyalty that counts.

The persistence of Al Shabaab attacks against both Amisom troops and their home countries as well as against the nascent Somali government have also forced Amisom to adopt a more aggressive posture. Following the July 2010 bombings against crowds watching a screening of the FIFA World Cup Final in Kampala which killed 74 people, the AU “reinterpreted” Amisom’s rules of engagement to allow for pre-emptive defence, which allowed Amisom to go on the offensive. Later that year, the UN Security council authorized a 50 percent expansion of Amisom’s mandated troop strength from 8000 to 12000. As a result, in August the next year, al Shabaab were forced out of Mogadishu.

Amisom was allowed a further 5700 soldiers in 2012 as well as an expanded logistical support package that greatly expanded the scope of its military operations in Somalia. In November 2013 the UN Security Council authorised a further surge of 2,500 fighting troops as well as support elements, including combat engineers and logistics personnel, bringing it to its current level of 22,000.

However, Amisom suffers from structural fragmentation in its command chain and realm of control. There are zones where Amisom troops operate alongside non-integrated Ethiopian (and Kenyan) troops who do not take orders from the Force Headquarters in Mogadishu. In addition, Amisom commanders from the various troop-contributing nations must first consult with their respective national militaries before allowing their troops to engage in any military operation in Somalia.

The amorphous nature of Amisom’s command structure not only allows the governments of the troop-contributing nations to exert a direct control over their contingents serving in Amisom, it also
disrupts effective communication between the different Amisom contingents. This poor communication has led different Amisom contingents to rely more on their home countries for military support rather than on Amisom. This explains why the Kenyan troops in El Adde first alerted their seniors in Nairobi of the attack before requesting for military assistance from Amisom. KDF was slow to provide any relief and the base had fallen by noon. There is no evidence that KDF troops in El Adde ever relayed a distress call to their Ethiopian allies in Gabarharey.

Further, Amisom lack of air capacity to move troops limits its ability to reinforce bases that are under attack. Despite the UN Security Council authorizing deployment of an aviation component of up to 12 helicopters comprising nine utility helicopters and three attack helicopters, these assets must come from the troop contributing countries as the UN has no military choppers of its own. Though several countries, including Kenya, had promised to deploy aircraft under Amisom, this hadn’t been done by the time of the El Adde attack. As a result, and as the KDF acknowledged, Amisom would have been unable to come to the rescue of the beleaguered base.

THE POLITICS OF PEACEKEEPING

Amisom does deserve the glowing commendations it has received from the international community for its sustained efforts at degrading the military capabilities of Al Shabaab, and for stabilising Somalia to the extent that democratic elections have been held and an internationally-recognised government has been inaugurated. Even so, there is a need to analyse the way that Amisom has evolved into a rented peace-enforcement mission that serves to legitimise neopatrimonial political systems – where state resources are used to secure the loyalty of clients in the general population.

Understanding how regional neopatrimonial politics affect the operations of Amisom will help us shed light on why Amisom has been unable of obliterate Al Shabaab, despite fielding a total of 22,000 well-paid and relatively well-equipped troops from Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda who are fighting militants whose numbers are estimated to range between 8,000 and 10,000.

Also, there is a need to assess how Amisom has served to entrench autocratic rule in troop-contributing nations such as Burundi, Ethiopia and Uganda, and whether the Kenyan government is using the Amisom card to retain power and ensure the current regime’s survival after the August 2017 general elections.

The Amisom mission has had a detrimental effect on democratic space in troop-contributing nations, and it is becoming evidently clear that to defeat 10,000 Islamic terrorists, nearly 200 million citizens in the East African nations of Kenya, Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Uganda will see their democratic rights curtailed. Also, the issue of military incompetence needs to be considered as it is a known fact that neopatrimony rarely values meritocracy and competence in military matters; it’s only loyalty that counts.

Furthermore, such governments are likely to engage the international community in terms that favour their regime survival over the stated objective of stabilising a conflict zone. Paradoxically, Somalia was able to conduct a relatively fair-and-free election in February 2017, while citizens in two Amisom-contributing nations were denied the same chance, all under the watch of the international community. In this context, the patron-client relationship between the ruling party and the military informs deployment of peacekeeping missions.

Peacekeeping operations become rent-generating ventures that benefit both the regime and the military while killing accountability.
Basically, rulers deploy their troops to peacekeeping zones that offer the highest dividends in terms of monetary rewards and regime protection. The ruling party acts as the patron that receives financial benefits, and then distributes it to the soldiers. In the process, the ruling party buys the loyalty of the military, and this increases the odds of regime survival.

Reports of KDF’s illicit trade in charcoal and sugar in the port of Kismayu have also led many to speculate whether KDF is in Somalia to benefit commercially. In November 2015, a Nairobi-based civil advocacy group named Journalists for Justice published an expose titled *Black And White – Kenya’s Criminal Racket in Somalia* that documented the illicit trading activities that KDF was engaging in while in control of the port of Kismayu. The Kenyan public was enraged, and calls for KDF to exit Somalia increased. However, KDF maintains that its mission in Somalia is critical and untainted with corruption.

Because the financial pay-outs are made monthly to the troop-contributing nation, it is regarded by the regime as rent paid for providing peacekeepers. In return, top military officials benefit from payouts, and they, in turn, ensure that the military remains loyal to the regime. As a consequence, such peacekeeping operations become rent-generating ventures that benefit both the regime and the military while killing accountability. Likewise, without any input from the citizenry, such regimes can conspire to ensure that their peacekeeping operations last for as long as possible.

Rarely do neopatrimonial powers ever relinquish power over their troops even when they are engaged in peacekeeping operations in foreign nations. This is what is happening to Amisom as the troop-contributing governments refuse to allow their peacekeepers to fall wholly under Amisom’s control; they ensure that they have direct military control over their peacekeepers, even if they fight under the Amisom hat. This also applies to KDF.

**REGIME-BOOSTING DIVIDENDS**

The Kenyan government’s decision to deploy KDF in Somalia was informed by three main concerns: national security concerns; humanitarian concerns; and the need for enhanced international legitimacy. Humanitarian concerns relate to Kenya’s plan to decongest, and eventually close, the Dadaab refugee camp and other camps hosting Somali refugees by repatriating refugees back to safe zones in Somalia. With regards to national security, Kenya had suffered from Somalia’s internecine conflict as it repeatedly spilled over into its bandit-prone north-eastern region, and by 2010, the threat of Al Shabaab radicalising Kenya’s restive Muslim population was too great to be wished away. A military campaign was then considered a feasible move. Still, was this military campaign planned well?

The answer to this question lies in the quality of military leadership. Starting from 2007, the political elite saw the need to hollow out the Kenyan military and recreate it as a dependable institution that can be relied upon during periods of crises. To achieve this, ethno-political considerations were prioritised over merit and competence. This removed the element of accountability that professional militaries value.

The decision of the Kenyan government to integrate KDF troops in Somalia into Amisom in July 2012 was informed by geopolitical concerns and economic reasons. By March 2012, Operation Linda Nchi had hemorrhaged the national coffers of over $180 million, and it was evident that the cost of managing a full-scale war against Al Shabaab in Somalia was quite prohibitive, if not unsustainable, especially as Kenya was suffering from low-grade economic recession occasioned by a difficult-to-manage inflation and a weak and unsteady currency.
Amisom suffers from structural fragmentation in its command chain and realm of control. There are zones where Amisom troops operate alongside non-integrated Ethiopian troops and these troops do not take orders from Amisom.

Kenya’s decision to stay on in Somalia under the umbrella of Amisom also has to do with national politics and the government’s desire to retain international legitimacy. Peacekeeping ventures offer lasting regime-boosting dividends. The governments of Burundi, Ethiopia and Uganda gained legitimacy from the international community, notably the European Union and the United States, because of their troop-contribution efforts towards Amisom. The US and the EU, two of the most vocal proponents of human rights and democracy, are also the main donors to the Amisom mission. Their silence on democracy matters is usually interpreted by autocratic regimes as tacit support for the government.

In both Uganda and Burundi, the ruling parties that oversaw the deployment of segments of their national military into Somalia were able to get controversially re-elected in what can best be described as sham elections, and still get their controversial electoral victories stamped as valid by both the US and the EU, despite concerns raised by democracy activists. Both nations have experienced periods of sustained domestic unrest and have used disproportionate force to either kill protestors, or coerce local democracy campaigners to abandon their activism.

Similar socio-political developments have been witnessed in Ethiopia. The ruling EPRDF (Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front) regime is accused of fomenting ethnic strife through skewed distribution of national resources and the concentration of political power within a clique of an ethnic-laced elite alliance. This has led to accusations of political marginalisation, human rights abuses, and forceful confiscation of land and other natural resources from underrepresented people.

Also, Ethiopia, despite a decade of sustained economic growth, also suffers from uneven economic development that has left a majority of Ethiopians impoverished and politically marginalised. These grievances led to the sudden eruption of mass protests in August 2016 that were followed by a six-month-long state of emergency in October (which has since been extended). To worsen matters, ethnic nationalism resurfaced, and has been stoked ever since by varied political activists.

When Ethiopia assessed that international condemnations against its protest management efforts were increasing, it simply withdrew hundreds of non-Amisom-integrated ENDF (Ethiopia National Defense Force) troops from Bakool and Hiiran regions of Somalia in October 2016. This withdrawal was done under the pretext that the soldiers were needed in Ethiopia to help manage the protests. However, the EPRDF had over 150,000 active ENDF troops at its disposal inside Ethiopia, and the troops withdrawn from Somalia were neither the best-trained nor the best-equipped. This shows that the pretext was used to cover up a more nuanced political motive. Interestingly, the withdrawal of these non-integrated soldiers immediately caused concern, with the UN stating that such withdrawals could create an exploitable security vacuum that could lead to the resurgence of Al Shabaab.

THE HUMAN COST

The above-mentioned problems also plague Kenya. Kenya is considered the most democratic nation in East and Central Africa and is also the economic powerhouse in the region. So why would the Kenyan regime need to enhance its political legitimacy?

Kenya sent KDF into Somalia with the thinly-veiled strategic objective of creating a Kenya-backed semi-autonomous administrative region called Jubbaland, which was to serve as a buffer zone
between Kenya and Al Shabaab-ruled zones in southern Somalia. This buffer zone was considered essential to securing a new transport corridor that President Mwai Kibaki’s government was planning to build to link the Lamu port to South Sudan and Ethiopia. However, what was first touted as a short and quick military incursion has now lasted nearly seven years. Yet, the Kenyan public has not been told about how many Kenyan soldiers have lost their lives in Somalia since 2011.

The Kenyan government’s decision to deploy KDF in Somalia was informed by three main concerns: national security concerns; humanitarian concerns; and the need for enhanced international legitimacy.

In 2014, *Operation Linda Nchi, Kenya’s Military Experience in Somalia* was published by Kenya Literature Bureau, a state-owned publishing house. This book was written by six primary authors, among them Lieutenant Colonel Paul M. Njuguna, who was later promoted to colonel in August 2016, and served as the KDF spokesman when the KDF base at Kulbiyow was raided in January 27, 2017. The book provides the official KDF-approved version of *Operation Linda Nchi*. It also serves as an excellent window into the military doctrine that guides military operations vis-à-vis media relations and the publication of casualty figures. According to the book, KDF lost less than 40 soldiers during the entire period of *Operation Linda Nchi*.

This is a surprising figure especially when the fatality count of Amisom is taken into account. In May 2013, Jan Eliasson, the UN’s Deputy Secretary-General, estimated that 3,000 Amisom troops had been killed since 2007. Amisom quickly objected to this fatality figure, but it is interesting to note that in October 2012, Kenya’s deputy foreign minister, Richard Onyonka, claimed that about 2,700 Ugandan soldiers had been killed in Somalia since 2007. Even while this government official was touting the death toll suffered by an allied troop-contributing nation, the Kenyan government remained guarded on divulging how many Kenyan soldiers had been killed.

In January 2017, Al Shabaab raided a KDF base in Kulbiyow and made away with some military hardware. However, the KDF spokesman, Colonel Paul Njuguna, released a press statement stating that the base never fell and that KDF had managed to successfully repulse the attack, and in the process had lost only nine soldiers. However, subsequent open source analysis by *Africa Defense Review* showed that the base was overrun and looted.

According to a policy paper entitled *Exit Strategy Challenges for the AU Mission in Somalia* published in February 2016 by the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, a Somalia-focused organization, and authored by Paul D. Williams and Abdirashid Hashi, KDF lost about 50 soldiers every month between October 2011 and February 2012. This translates to a death toll of more than 200 in five months, which is far greater that the death toll figures given by KDF in its official version of *Operation Linda Nchi*. In October 2016, the UN, through SEMG, revealed that about 150 KDF soldiers were killed in El Adde. These two figures give a hint as to the scale of the human cost of Kenya’s mission in Somalia.

So why does KDF conceal its death toll in Somalia? One of the official reasons given is the need to maintain the morale of the soldiers. But perhaps the main reasons are to minimise public opposition Kenya’s anti-terrorism campaigns both in Kenya and in Somalia and to gain political legitimacy internationally.

Amisom is rated as one of the deadliest peacekeeping missions, yet countries in the region are still eager to contribute troops. Why? One of the main reasons is that contributing troops to Amisom pays financial and political dividends. At the moment, it is evident that Uganda, Burundi and Ethiopia are
leaning towards autocratic rule as democratic space gradually diminishes in these nations. The governments of these countries need to deflect attention away from their domestic problems and secure an economic lifeline during periods of economic crises triggered by domestic unrest. So they rely on Amisom for both economic reprieve and political legitimacy.

It is clear that the obfuscation of the death toll figures by the Kenyan government is designed to not only save face, but also to protect the credibility of Kenya as a strong regional peace-enforcer. If the Kenyan government admits to a high death toll, it will face domestic opposition to its mission in Somalia, and this will automatically weaken its legitimacy if it decides to use its Amisom credentials to stay in power after the August 2017 elections.

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