



The Axis-of-Evil Coalition in the Horn of Africa

By Anwar Abdifattah Bashir



The political dynamics in the Horn of Africa have always been tense and volatile. Being a geographically strategic region, it has historically attracted competition among the big powers, with the region's diversity in terms of population, norms, politics, and history rendering it susceptible to proxy politics emanating mainly from Western countries.

The countries of the Horn of Africa are Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan, South Sudan, and by extension, Kenya, and Uganda. In this article, we focus on Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea. More specifically, we shall examine how the incumbent leaders in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea have created a coalition to extend their terms of office under the pretence of "Horn of Africa Integration".

The Horn of Africa region has been vulnerable to multipolar politics ever since, at the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, 13 European countries laid claim to Africa's territories: Britain signed the Rodd Treaty with Menelik II of Ethiopia in 1897 that dominated the country's administration, Djibouti came under French control while Italy took Somalia, Italian Somaliland, and Eritrea. By 1914, with the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia, all other African countries were under colonial rule.

Russia joined the race during the Cold War and supported the regimes in Somalia and Ethiopia, with

President Siad Barre of Somalia and Prime Minister Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia becoming close allies of Russia. But despite their allegiance to the former Soviet Union, the two countries fought a vicious war from 1977 to 1978.

Somalia

From 1960 to 1969, Somalia was a fledgling democracy led by civilian governments established through peaceful transfer of power. The military seized power in 1969, led by Siad Barre who ruled with an iron fist until he was ousted in 1991, leaving in his wake a civil war that killed thousands of Somalis, and pushed thousands more into exile. In 2000, Djibouti called a reconciliation conference that brought together civil society groups and culminated in the formation of the first government since the beginning of the civil war. The new government was short-lived, however, as the warlords who controlled most of the south-central regions resisted and revolted. In 2004, the second government was formed under the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia under the leadership of the late President Abdullahi Yusuf.

However, this government made the same mistakes as its predecessor, calling on the African Union to send troops to support President Yusuf's government and escort him to the capital, Mogadishu. The new government and the Islamic Courts Union (ICU)—which controlled most of the south-central region—held several meetings in Sudan to try to reach an agreement, but the talks failed. A military confrontation between troops of the Islamic Courts Union and the Transitional Federal Government backed by Ethiopian forces ensued and, after a bitter fight and great loss of life, the TFG entered Mogadishu. Following a political fallout between the president and his prime minister, President Abdullahi Yusuf resigned, and the leader of the ICU, Sheikh Sharif, succeeded Yusuf after negotiations between the leader of the ICU and the international community.

The first elections since the outbreak of the civil war were held under President Sheikh Sharif and Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, a civilian and veteran academic, was elected. Somalia became a federal state with five federal member states under President Hassan who oversaw the implementation of the provisional constitution which had been adopted in August 2012.

Although there were allegations of corruption, President Hassan's government was relatively stable. One person one vote elections were scheduled to take place in 2016, but they were postponed for various reasons, including the insecurity caused by the Al-Shabaab and disagreement between the federal government and the leaders of the federal member states and others. Despite the challenges, however, President Hassan Sheikh's administration pioneered indirect parliamentary elections where 51 delegates from each clan would each elect the members of parliament. Although the process was not considered a fair fight, the transition was smooth. In February 2017, Hassan Sheikh lost his re-election bid, and President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo became his successor. President Farmajo received a warm welcome from the public and many accolades from the international community and the neighbouring countries. Indeed, many Somalis believed that he would be better than his predecessors and would deliver the one person, one vote in 2021.

The situation turned when the government extradited Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) commander Abdikarim Qalbi Dhagah to Ethiopia, leading to a public backlash, protests, and fierce criticism of the government. It was the first time that a Somali person had been extradited to Ethiopia, a country that many Somalis consider the archenemy. Since then, public support for the government has plummeted. Intimidation, attacks, smear campaigns, extrajudicial actions, and incarceration have become the modus operandi of the current government and the Somali people's hope in Farmajo's government has declined dramatically. Meanwhile, Farmajo's government declared the UN Ambassador to Somalia persona non grata and expelled him, leading to international condemnation of his government. The government of Somalia also cut ties with Kenya,

a country which has hosted the largest number of Somali refugees since 1991.

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The mandate of the sitting president ended on 8 February 2021 without elections being held for a successor government. In March 2021, the Somali parliament unilaterally extended the term of the president for another two years, which resulted in a confrontation and a split within the National army. After two weeks of chaos, the parliament reversed its decision.

The long-awaited one person one vote elections became a pipedream and indirect parliamentary elections were maintained albeit with an increase in the number of the delegates from 51 to 101. The May 2022 parliamentary elections were been mired in fraud, favouritism, rigging, and massive irregularities and the country has been plunged into uncertainty.

Ethiopia

Historically, Ethiopia has never held free and fair elections. On the contrary, the country has lived under a political dynasty and patrimonial leadership interspersed with coups. There has always been a power struggle between Ethiopia's diverse communities. The Amhara, who collaborated with the colonial powers, enjoyed the support of the British Administration under the Rodd Treaty of 1897 agreement, and dominated the country's politics. Both Menelik II and Haile Selassie marginalized other communities, especially the Oromo, the Somali, and Tigrayans. In 1974, Mengistu Haile Mariam overthrew Haile Selassie in a coup d'état and moved the country's allegiance away from the West to the Soviet Union, leading to a proxy war in Ethiopia between the US and Russia. Mengistu was ruthless to his critics, especially the Oromo, Tigray, and Somali; he was known as the "Butcher of Addis Ababa" and the "Red Terror."

Led by Meles Zenawi, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) ousted Mengistu's regime in 1991 and Ethiopia adopted federalism under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition party made up of the TPLF, Amhara, Oromo, and the Southern Nations and Nationalities. The first mistake committed by the Zenawi regime was to disregard other communities, particularly the Somalis, who are the third largest community in terms of population. The second mistake was to nullify the results of the elections in the Somali region where the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) had won by a landslide, resulting in a confrontation between the Zenawi regime and the ONLF. After three years of demonstrations emanating from the Oromo region and spreading to the Amhara region, Prime Minister Haile Mariam Desalegn resigned in 2018. It was the first time in Ethiopia that a public office holder had resigned due to pressure from the citizens. Abiy Ahmed took over as prime minister in April 2018.

Eritrea

Eritrea was an Italian colony before World War II, but after Italy was defeated in the war in 1952, the United Nations tried to federate Eritrea to Ethiopia to as a compromise for Ethiopia's claim of sovereignty and Eritrea's desire for independence. Unfortunately, after nine years, Haile Selassie dissolved the federation annexed and annexed Eritrea.

As a result, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which was created in 1961, revolted against Haile Selassie. When Haile Selassie was dethroned by the Derg regime, former Prime Minister Mengistu Haile Mariam, who had led the revolution, tried to reach a settlement with the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) without success and insurgencies

against his rule increased. In 1991, when Mengistu was ousted by the rebel movements led by Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Prime Minister Meles Zenawi tried to keep Eritrea as part of Ethiopia, leading to renewed conflict with the rebel groups. After two years of fierce fighting Eritrea gained its independence in 1993 but the country has never held an election since; Isaias Afwerki, the first president, is still at the helm. After five years of a territorial dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Badme War erupted in 1998, lasting until 2000 and claiming more than 100,000 lives.

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Several peace agreements were brokered, including by the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), the Algiers Comprehensive Peace Accord (ACPA), the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), all culminating in deadlock, and Addis Ababa and Asmara remaining at loggerheads.

Horn of Africa Integration Project

With the exception of April 2018, when the former Prime Minister Haile Mariam Desalegn resigned following three years of demonstrations against EPRDF rule, Ethiopia had never experienced a peaceful transition of power. Abiy Ahmed, who was part of the EPRDF rule, succeeded Desalegn.

In the beginning, under Prime Minister Abiy, Ethiopia enjoyed relative press freedom, there was greater inclusion of women in politics, and the 20 years of animosity between Ethiopia and Eritrea came to an end, paving the way for Abiy to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. Abiy Ahmed visited Mogadishu in June 2018, where he met his counterpart President Farmajo. In a joint statement, the two leaders talked about strengthening diplomatic and trade relations between their two countries, with Ethiopia pledging to invest in Somalia's port facilities. But apart from that brief statement, nobody knows precisely what the agenda of Abiy's meeting with Farmajo was. President Farmajo has also visited Addis Ababa several times, but has not informed Somalia's parliament what has been agreed between the two leaders. In December 2018, Eritrean president Afwerki visited Mogadishu and had talks with president Farmajo; the agenda of the meeting between the two leaders remains unknown. Somalia's president also paid a visit to Asmara in July 2018.

Eritrea used to supply weapons and ammunition to the ICU during its conflict with the Somali government of the late President Abdullahi Yusuf, leading the Somali government to accuse Eritrea of supporting the extremist Al-Shabaab rebel group and as a result, the United Nations imposed an embargo on Eritrea in 2009. The UN lifted sanctions on Eritrea in November 2018 after the country reconciled with Ethiopia and Somalia. The leaders of the three countries, Abiy, Farmajo, and Afwerki, signed a little-known "Tripartite Agreement". In hindsight, Abiy's reconciliation with Afwerki was to enable Ethiopia to ostracize Ethiopia's Tigrayan community and launch an attack on the Tigray region. Abiy's secret agenda came out into the open on 4 November 2020 when he attacked the Tigray region backed by Eritrean troops. The coalition forces have committed gross human rights violations in the Tigray region, which has led to international condemnation against the brutality of the coalition troops and calls for Eritrean forces to withdraw from the Tigray region.

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Meanwhile, although there is no smoking gun, there is a strong possibility that the Somali troops being trained in Eritrea are involved in the Tigray war. The Somali government had denied that Somali soldiers were sent to Eritrea for training but later confirmed this.

Despite the ongoing civil war and the political discontent in Ethiopia resulting from the delayed polls that were supposed to take place in September 2020, Abiy has decided to remain at the helm by hook or by crook.

The regimes in Addis Ababa, Mogadishu, and Asmara that I have called the axis-of-evil coalition have led the region astray through lack of an adequate response to the protracted drought, the unbridled corruption, the instability, and the internecine conflicts. The reasons behind the “Tripartite Agreement” between the three leaders were not and never have been to serve their respective people, enhance the trade relations, or improve security, but to keep a hold on power through their “Trojan horse” deal. This may lead to a revolt by the oppositions in the three countries that could finally destabilize the entire Horn of Africa region.

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