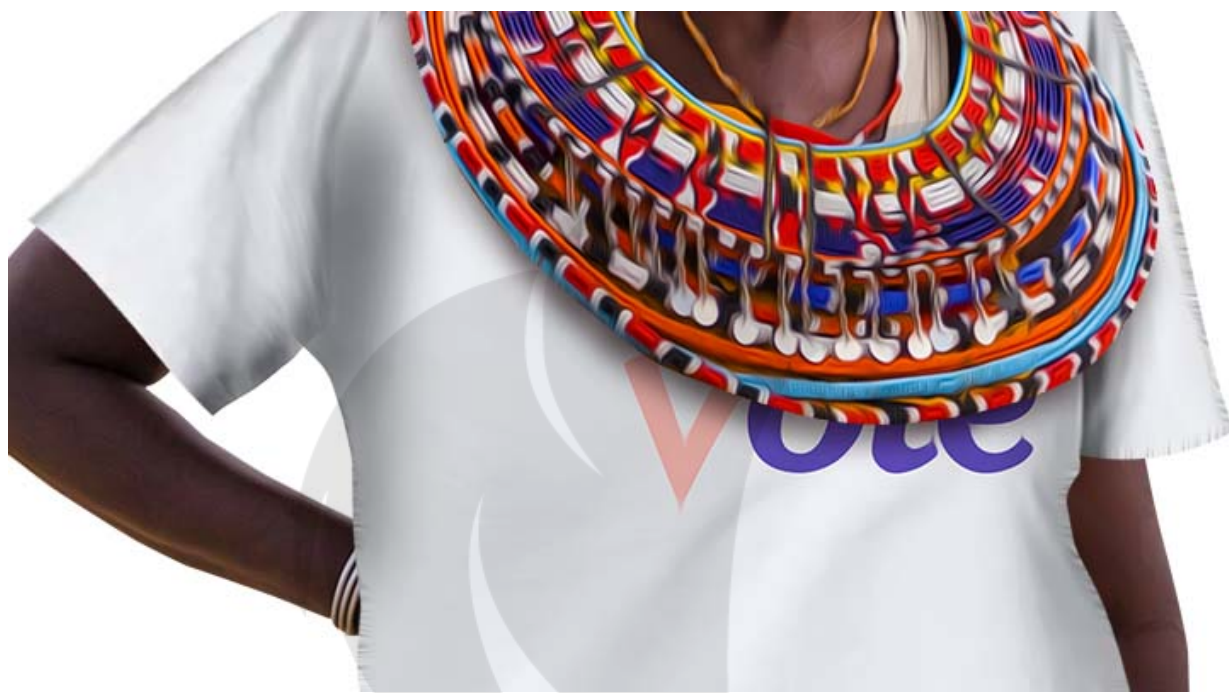




# Cultural Nostalgia: Or How to Exploit Tradition for Political Ends

By Dalle Abraham



With devolution, northern Kenya has become an important regional cultural hub, and cultural elders have acquired a new political salience. The resources available to the governors have made the region once again attractive. Important geographical reconnections and essential cultural linkages have been re-established.

These cultural reconnections are happening on a spatial-temporal scale, and old cultures have been revived and given a new role. Contiguous regions hitherto separated by boundaries, state policies and wars are now forging new ways of engaging with each other, Mandera with southwestern Somalia and the [Lower Shabelle region](#), [Marsabit with the Yabello region](#) the Borana hails from, and [Wajir with southwestern Ethiopia](#).

The speed with which Mandera [governor Ali Roba sent a congratulatory message to Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed Farmaajo](#) when he was elected—before even the Kenyan president—or the meetings between the [governor of Marsabit and Ethiopia's premier](#), or how a delegation of northeastern [politicians "covertly" visited Somalia](#), are just some of the new developments that have been encouraged by devolution.

With each of these connections, significant shifts are taking place in the region. But of even greater

significance is how cultural institutions have been repurposed and given a central role in the north's electoral politics.

### **The re-emergence of sultans**

When Wabar Abdille Wabar Abdi, the 78-year-old king of the Degodia, visited Kenya for the first time in 2019, members of parliament and governors from the region [ran around like zealous subalterns](#). He commanded loyalty and legitimacy without seeming to need them, a status that the Kenyan president or any other formal authority could never achieve in the mind-set of the people of Wajir.

Stories of his power preceded Wabar Abdille Wabar Abdi's visit to Wajir, shared in exciting detail as clans collected camels for his reception. It was said that the late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi died because he lied to Wabar Abdille Wabar Abdi, that his supernatural powers were not to be joked with. It was said that [his title is hereditary](#) and that his main occupation is prayer.

A friend joked that a school named Wabar Abdille had been opened overnight; Wabar Abdille Wabar Abdi was in Wajir for a week. Later, President Uhuru Kenyatta received [Wabar Abdille at State House](#) and made him a Chief of the Order of the Burning Spear (O.B.S.)—Kenya's highest national honour—for establishing “cross-border peace” and for “promoting unity and understanding in the region.”

There was Kenya with its leaders, and then there were the Degodia with a true leader who was loved and revered.

Locally, the larger Degodia *saransoor* (clan brotherhood) gave Wabar Abdille Wabar Abdi 101 camels. This gift was amplified by a further 101 camels given him by the [Jibrail clan](#) for his community service. Strong opinions were shared on social media, with allegations that the Jibrail had presented themselves as different from the *saransoor*, the larger Degodia ethnic cluster.

Post-devolution, previously dormant traditional cultural institutions like the position of sultan or the Ugaas have experienced a renaissance. In the past several months, there has been a flurry of activity, with the appointment/coronation of Ugaas and Sultans in the run-up to the 2022 election season. At the [Abdalla Deyle clan coronation](#), Ahmed Abdullahi, the former governor for Wajir said, “I ask politicians like myself to give space to the cultural and religious leaders. We can do this by engaging in constructive politics.”

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Another resident who spoke after him said, “Politicians have been blamed for disturbing the Ugaas and whatnot. Well, Ugaas is leadership; there is an Ugaas seat, there is a sultanate. For this, we shall continue to disturb and disrupt it. We shall continue saying a certain Ugaas is my clan. We shall continue bribing them by giving them money. What they shall do with that will depend on them.”

### **Cultural revivalism as political spectacle**

Each coronation that has taken place since the advent of devolution—there have been eight, three in Wajir in the last three months—represents a sentimental celebration of a bygone era. The prominence of the Wabar, the Abba Gada, the Sultans and Ugaas, and the Yaa in the past 15 years is a case study in political manipulation. With their aura of purity, the traditional institutions mitigate

the shortcomings of formal electoral politics. The revival of these institutions fulfils a need created by the exigencies of marginalisation, which demand the invention of psychological security.

In almost all the coronations, words like “modern dynasty”, “opening a new chapter”, and “unity of purpose” were used. Terms that ooze cultural nostalgia. The Sultan was projected as a “symbol of unity” who would “champion community interest,” “restore long lost glory,” “revive historical prowess.” And also play the political roles of negotiating for peace, vetting electoral candidates, bringing order to the council of elders, and representing clan interests in the political decision-making process.

The prominence of the Wabar, the Abba Gada, the Sultans and Ugaas, and the Yaa in the past 15 years is a case study in political manipulation.

In most cases, those anointed Sultan were former chiefs, sons of former chiefs, former councillors, shrewd businessmen, and retired teachers who had made at least one trip to Mecca and Medina. Upon becoming Sultans, these secular individuals suddenly assume pseudo-spiritual-religious roles in the community. The newly assigned roles are only loosely based on the traditional role of the Sultan.

The publicity around their coronation was a necessary public spectacle, designed to add substance, status and power to the anointed so that whomever they endorse is accepted without question. The revival of these old traditions is, in most cases, intended to provoke nostalgia in order to bolster the perception of traditional legitimacy. The creation of a council of elders made up of the wealthy and their middle-class agents has been enabled by the wealth created by the devolved system of governance.

Counties have availed the resources for politicians to package nostalgia and use the emotions provoked to market themselves as woke cultural agents. Take, for example, the case of the Ajuran community who, in September 2021, threw a [party in Nairobi to celebrate the Ajuran Empire](#), which reigned 500 years ago. But at their core, the speeches were about the 2022 elections, and cultural nostalgia was just a means of bringing the people together.

### **A temporary bridge**

It is easy to see how the excited use of the title Sultan is a temporary convenience. The last time it was used was during the waning years of colonialism. Then, even the Somalified Borana, like Hajj Galma Dida, the paramount chief who was killed by the Shifta, had been referred to as Sultan in letters to the British since it was a title that suggested status. With devolution, use of the title has been revived and it is generously conferred, an ill-fitting Islamic graft on Somali culture.

### **Changes**

The revival of these traditional governance institutions is emerging while states in the Horn of Africa strive to bring into their formal fold these hitherto peripheral regions. Traditional institutions have been critical arbiters of the peace process, where formal institutions have failed at the macro level. This has been possible because the conventional cultural institutions enjoy trust, legitimacy, and a presence more intimate than the formal governance system.

The contributions of the traditional institutions to the governance of the region cannot be gainsaid. Somalia's Xerr system and Ethiopia's Gada system are critical in ensuring peace and harmony in their areas. During Wabar Abdi Wabar Abdille's visit, [Miles Alem](#), the Ethiopian Ambassador to

Kenya said, “You can’t preach regional integration from your capitals. The politicians have to use spiritual leaders, religious leaders and elders of our people such as Wabar Abdi Wabar Abdille.”

### **Abba Gada, Oromo and Borana**

During the 2017 election contest for the Marsabit County gubernatorial seat, Kura Jarso, the 72nd Borana, [issued a \*mura\*](#), an uncontestable decision endorsing Mohammed Mohamud Ali as the sole Borana gubernatorial candidate. This was based on a quasi-consensual declaration; before he issued his *mura*, 60 elders in Kenya had “endorsed” Mohamud Ali. The Abba Gada’s blessings were thus a final incontestable seal. With his word, all the Borana were expected to rally behind Mohammed Ali’s gubernatorial bid.

For the first time, finally, here was the Abba Gada giving his direct political endorsement to an individual, and on video. The video of the Abba Gada issuing the *mura* was shared widely. [He is recorded saying](#), “Whoever defies this decision has divided the Borana, and we shall discuss their issue. . . . Take this message to where you will go. . . . Guide and protect this decision.”

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But all this revival, invention and spectacle were not happening without drama and contest. There was a teacher who taught history and religion at a local secondary school in Marsabit; I had christened him Bandura, the name of one of the scholars with whose theories he would pepper his conversations.

Bandura was a jolly fellow who for a few years ran a Facebook page in which he extolled the virtues of the Gada system and Pax Borana. In December 2018, the Borana Supreme Leader, the Abba Gada, was in Marsabit to officiate a traditional ceremony conferring the status of *Qae*—a revered position in Borana political culture—on J. J. Falana, a former member of parliament for Saku constituency.

Upon becoming Sultans, these secular individuals suddenly assume pseudo-spiritual-religious roles in the community.

Bandura, the history and religion teacher, was J.J. Falana’s and Abba Gada Kura Jarso’s clansman—the Digalu-Matari clan. There was not a better opportunity for commentary on Borana affairs than this visit and this occasion. In his comments on social media, Bandura was of the opinion that J.J. Falana did not deserve the new title and called out the Abba Gada’s decision as founded on a folly. He allegedly said that the Abba Gada was better off placing the title on a dog than on the former MP.

Bandura added another indiscretion to this political statement by refusing to heed the Abba Gada’s summons, and a government vehicle was dispatched to pick him up. At the residence of the former MP where the traditional ceremony was being held, the teacher was questioned, and to the inquiries, Bandura allegedly responded in a light-hearted, unapologetic and near-dismissive manner. A *mura*, an excommunication order, was immediately issued, perhaps the Abba Gada’s most potent control tool over his subjects.

With the excommunication order, the Abba Gada also asked the Borana not to give Bandura any assistance should he find himself in any difficulty. He was not to be buried if he died, his sons and daughters were not to marry, his cows were not to be grazed and watered on Borana land. Under the enormity of the sanction, Bandura fainted thrice.

Those who witnessed the event say that Bandura was like a man possessed by some spiritual force; he fell to his knees, rolled in the mud as he begged for forgiveness. This, too, to others, hinted at the mythical powers of the Abba Gada. The event, and what it portended, was unprecedented in Marsabit.

In centuries past, a customary law, *serr daawe*, forbade the Abba Gada from crossing into Kenya. But following devolution in Kenya, this law was changed to allow the Abba Gada to travel to Kenya.

The first two times the Abba Gada visited Marsabit were as a ceremonial guest. The first visit was to attend the coronation of the Marsabit governor on 21 September 2017. He returned three months later, in December 2017, as a guest at a cultural festival. His third visit, in December 2018, was to attend to his clan's affairs and to make J.J. Falana a *Qae*.

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That last visit of the Abba Gada was full of intrigues; the governor deliberately avoided meeting the delegation but tried to provide accommodation and meals even in his absence.

Later, the Abba Gada made an impromptu visit to Isiolo—the other key Borana county. A blogger referred to the visit as [Cultural Regional Diplomacy](#) saying it had thrown “the town into a rapturous frenzy . . . a mammoth crowd trooped in a convoy of about 200 vehicles covering more than 40 Kilometers away from Isiolo town to receive the most powerful Borana leader.”

After the visit to Isiolo, the Abba Gada visited Raila Odinga's office. The [Abba Gada later told BBC Oromia](#) that he had discussed unity, culture, and peace.

“They are on this side [Kenya], and thus, they are far from culture. They have forgotten their culture. Culture is a body, and it should be strengthened. Those without culture are slaves. If your language and your culture are lost, your identity won't be visible. You will be a slave to the culture of those around you.”

In his book *Oromo Democracy: An indigenous African Political system*, Asmarom Legesse says that for Kenya Borana, “The Gada chronology, covering 360 years of history, no longer plays any significant role in their lives. It exists in severely abridged forms,” and that the reason the Gada “is an irrelevant institution in the lives of Kenya Boran today is because there are no Gada leaders in their territory.” Legesse observes that what remains of Oromo political organisation in Northern Kenya “is the culture and language of Gada and age-sets, but not the working institutions. . . . The Boran of Marsabit can talk about their institutions as if they still governed them, but the institutions themselves do not exist.”

Legesse concludes that Kenya Borana's knowledge of the Gada system “is very shallow, and they perform hardly any of the Gada rituals or political ceremonies—Gada Moji (the final rite of retirement) being the only significant exception.”

After 360 years of absence, more than the political endorsements, Bandura's excommunication became the symbolic assertion of the Abba Gada's return.

Bandura's excommunication was lifted after 24 hours, and Bandura was blessed. Shortly after the blessings, Bandura got an opportunity to travel to the Netherlands to present an innovative project idea in an NGO competition. On his return, he was employed as a quality assurance officer in the

Marsabit County Government. The mythical powers of the Abba Gada had manifested first in Bandura's fainting, then in his travel to The Hague, and finally in the job change.

Even while based in Ethiopia, the Gada system has animated Borana electoral politics in the region. In the past, for most Kenyan Borana, the Gada institution has been only part of a nostalgic political campaign repertoire.

In a famous 1997 campaign song, at the end of Jarso Jillo Fallana's ten years in parliament, the singer says,

"Gadan Aba tokko, gann sathetinn chitte bekhi, Gadaan Jarso Jillo Gann lamann thabarte bekhi. . . ."

The Gada era/leadership cycle ends at eight years, but the end of Jarso Jillo's leadership term is two years overdue. . . .

Writing about this, Hassan H. Kochore says that for the Borana, "*Gada* and its associated ritual of *gadamojji* is appropriated in music to construct a strong narrative of Boran identity in the context of electoral politics."

The singer in the 1997 campaign song reveals an important facet of the Borana mind-set. A cursory analysis of all elected Borana leaders in the Kenyan parliament reveals that there have been only two members of parliament who have served a third parliamentary term, which for one MP was a party nomination. This contrasts with the Somali and their immediate neighbours, the Gabra, where third and even fourth parliamentary terms are not extraordinary.

More than the political endorsements, Bandura's excommunication became the symbolic assertion of the Abba Gada's return.

The Borana system had supported 560 years of peaceful traditional democratic transitions (70 changeovers of political leadership with eight-year rotations) under the *Gada* institution. Is the abuse that Borana parliamentarians in Kenya received at the end of their two parliamentary terms, less a commentary on their failure to deliver, than a demand for the application of the traditional 8-year cycle of the *Gada* system ingrained in their psyche over the centuries?

For the Kenyan Borana, it seems this internal socio-political environment has shaped the legitimacy of electoral democracy. The traditional social structure and political institutions of a community have a bearing on such a community's electoral behaviour (the conventional basis of political legitimacy).

It would seem that within the Borana's Gada system is the belief that there is nothing new or different an elected politician can offer beyond eight years in office. The Borana system predates Western democracy by more than 200 years. Kenya's system of electoral democracy, which has been around for a mere 58 years, is too new to displace ideas that have evolved over the past five centuries.

Bandura was a tiny man, and his encounter with the Abba Gada is recent. Decades ago, another major clash had occurred between another Abba Gada and a Borana member of parliament.

In June 1997, with Oromo calls for liberation in Ethiopia spilling over into Moyale politics, fighters of the Oromo Liberation Front hiding in Kenya and OLF politics in high gear, Moyale town was polarised, with OLF sympathisers on one side and those against them on the other. As the 1997 election fever gripped the region, the then Abba Gada arrived in Moyale town, defying centuries of

*serr dawwe*, the law that forbade him to cross into Kenya.

Also present was Mohamed Galgallo, the then Moyale member of parliament, who was viewed as a “liberator”, a hero and chief OLF sympathiser. The Abba Gada is said to have arrived in Moyale dressed in a suit, a cowboy hat and leather shoes, in a government vehicle with security in tow. In the gathering, the Abba Gada urged Kenya Borana to stop supporting the OLF. This didn’t sit well with Galgallo, who is alleged to have grabbed the microphone from the Abba Gada and given the Borana Supreme Leader a piece of his mind.

A resident of Moyale recalls Galgallo asking, “We have been told that the Abba Gada never crosses into Kenya or wears a suit or shoes like yours. . . . Have you come here as a government minister or as a traditional leader?”

This led the Abba Gada to curse him, asking the Borana to choose another leader. Galgallo didn’t campaign in 1997 and, according to local lore, his life has not been good ever since, not even when he served as a nominated member of parliament.

Kenya’s system of electoral democracy, which has been around for a mere 58 years, is too new to displace ideas that have evolved over the past five centuries.

Almost three decades later, during the last Abba Gada’s visit to Marsabit, other incidences of defiance were witnessed, of men who refused to attend his events or heed his summons. One of the Abba Gada’s clan members I spoke to told me that not heeding such a summon is like being called by Uhuru and refusing to go. To do such a thing must take a lot of courage, he said.

Even so, stories are freely exchanged in the Borana region of how errant persons who defied the Abba Gada’s ruling, summons or decisions were often beset by tragedies—going deaf, going dumb, and dying suddenly.

The slow process of the Abba Gada’s loss of his traditional legitimacy can be gleaned from certain occurrences, such as the pervasive rumour that spread across Marsabit that the Abba Gada was on the county government’s payroll, or that his frequent visits were to follow up on payments for his “contracts”.

The Gada system has been relatively resilient under various forms of state-imposed changes, assaults by the Amhara, and Ethiopia’s federalist policies which have attempted to manipulate the Gada by interchanging religious and political roles and twinning traditional roles with formal state ones. In Ethiopia, the Gada system has been so effective in co-evolving with the state that communities that didn’t have the Gada political system have invented a similar one or adopted the Gada structure.

A classic example are the Gabra and the Burji of Southern Ethiopia. They are traditionally decentralised but now have an “Abba Gada” without however having instituted the attendant socio-political and cultural institutions of the Gada. The Kenyan Gabra must be surprised by their brothers in Ethiopia who have had two Abba Gadas so far; the first one served for 16 years, and the second one is serving his second year since his coronation.

The Burji seem unable to name their Gadas despite claims that they too had a Gada system but that it disappeared 100 years ago. Their elders are at a loss to explain how they evolved the system and their claim seems contrived.

## **Yaa Gabra**

The Gabra people, the camel nomads of northern Kenya, have “no institutionalised political structure on a tribal level”. According to the late Fr. Tablino, a missionary-anthropologist who worked for a long time amongst the Gabra, “the Gabra ‘nation’ could be described as a federation with five capitals, or yaa. All the structures are separate and self-contained within each phratry. The head of the yaa, known as the Qaalu, played a religious role and not a political one, but he had a moral influence.”

The Gabra seldom have a pan-Gabra assembly comprising the five Yaa. When it happens, the grand Yaa meetings happen after a very long time. When they meet, they discuss essential crosscutting matters that affect the whole community. Fr. Tablino documents only four pan-Gabra clan assemblies—in 1884, 1887, 1934 and 1998. In 1884, the Yaa met to “discuss civil law which reviewed judicial matters.” In 1887, “decisions were made to redistribute livestock for the benefit of the poor.” In 1934, the Yaa met on the northern slopes of the Huri Hills where “topics such as History, cycles, poverty, wealth and livestock distribution and redistribution, all were aired.”

But in 1998, “an extraordinary meeting at Balesa of representatives of all five yaa” was held. This time it was “because a serious conflict had occurred among the Gabra during and immediately after the campaign for the general political elections of Kenya in December 1998.” The primary objective of the meeting was to reject “such political interference in the Gabra way of life.”

It seems that the 1998 Yaa assembly did not make a lasting impact because in 2011, in Kalacha, the Yaa met to endorse Amb. Ukur Yatani for the Marsabit gubernatorial seat in what has been dubbed the Kalacha Declaration. They met twice in 2016, in June and in December. In each of the last three meetings, their discussions were about individuals and not crosscutting communal affairs. In the previous two meetings, the candidates they endorsed were rejected. Gabra professionals called the Yaa’s decision partisan and corrupt. The Gabra Yaa at the Kalacha assembly went away with egg on their face, their decisions ignored. Both gubernatorial contestants from the Gabra community claimed to have been endorsed by the Yaa.

Following devolution, the Yaa has met three times in just six years (2011-2016); almost the same number of times they had met in the preceding 126 years (1884-2010). For a long time, the traditional system had inspired legitimacy due to the infrequency of its judicial, cultural, political decrees. Now, they were becoming too frequent, and with this familiarity, contempt was brewing. The traditional political ordinances, imbued with the spiritualism and the mysticism of tradition, were being tested by unforgiving adjutants. The elders invoked their untested and theoretically supernatural powers across northern Kenya and put themselves at the risk of ridicule and disrespect.

## **2022 and the future**

As we edge closer to another general election we see a repeat of past general elections across northern Kenya. The political class have endorsed sultans and Ugaases and set up “legitimation” schemes for their favoured councils of elders. That process has been completed and now the councils of elders are in turn legitimising the political class, with almost all the endorsements for the 2022 elections going to rich contractors and past politicians.

The Gabra Yaa at the Kalacha assembly went away with egg on their face, their decisions ignored.



In Mandera, the Asare clan who had formed an *ad hoc* committee eight months ago vetted [four individuals](#) interested in the gubernatorial post and eventually settled on the current Mandera County Assembly Speaker. One of the contestants has rejected the outcome, saying the process was corrupt.

In Isiolo, a faction of Borana elders have [endorsed](#) the former Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission chairperson Halakhe Dida Waqo as Isiolo Governor.

### **The national gaze**

The control of the councils of elders brings a two-fold benefit to the region's politicians. The governor has little opposition at the grassroots. He has reduced the council of elders to agents of his charity, doled out as employment for the children of elders or in the form of lucrative contracts. The elders now have new roles at the national level—to deliver votes and popular support to their national-level cronies.

On the other hand, governors incentivise the elders and use the concessions granted to control them. They eventually throw these elders under the bus of public opinion and move on swiftly, as Ali Roba did during the 2016 election in Mandera.

A casual observation of the past eight years of devolution portrays the councils of elders in northern Kenya as stupefied antelopes caught in the headlights of a powerful vehicle. Most elders have been reduced to simple brokers without legitimacy who serve only as political agents with no ethical values. Their cultural events are now political days.

But traditions are malleable things and are not apolitical. Even while making new concessions, the elders are learning new rules. For instance, professional bodies are also acting as a significant counterweight to the excesses of the elders. The Gabra professionals' protest of the Yaa's manipulation during the hurried endorsement of Ukur Yatani in 2016 is one example.

Social media criticisms offer a dramatic example of how elders seem to be caught up in a situation they little understand or control. Their attempts to censor dissenting views expressed on social media have so far failed. But cases of elders summoning so-and-so's son for saying whatnot on a Facebook page or in a WhatsApp group have occurred in many northern counties.

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The next frontier of conflict will be how retired civil servants, who are increasingly taking up roles in the "council of elders" as post-retirement employment, will deal with dissent from professionals and social media.

The invention of parallel councils and the emergence of factions within councils of elders have severe implications for conflict arbitration processes and the management of pastureland and rangeland. The fake councils of elders invented by the political class for their own needs have also robbed true elders of their legitimacy. The contempt directed at the retired teachers and business people seems to signify that the elders are all corrupt and ineffective. The long-term implications of this are the death of traditional institutions. It will take courageous intervention led by professionals and true elders to stop this manipulation and adulteration of traditional institutions.

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