

Challenges of decentralisation in Ethiopia's Somali region

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Ethiopia's Somali Regional State or region 5 represents a vivid testimony to the fruitless attempts to establish a functional administration in a border region drawn into constant political turmoil. Ever since the Somali region was granted its own 'autonomous' administration in 1993, state presence has remained embryonic in urban centres and has nearly been fictional in the rural areas. By the mid-1990s the need to establish effective local government, and the impediments militating against that drive, had been recognized. Yet the past decade passed without any noteworthy devolution of resources and power to the 51 *wereda* (districts) of the Somali region. As a result, the performance of the Somali region's public institutions has, up to this day, been far from impressive. Major towns such as Jijiga and Gode boast schools, medical facilities, a police force, and telecommunication services, the efficiency of which is questionable at best. Outside these urban centres, service delivery for the region's estimated 3.5 million inhabitants is limited to occasional food aid distribution and random interventions by security forces.

Under the impulsion of international and national pressure, region 5 embarked on a troubled process of decentralisation in 2004 - a move that was preceded by the region's first ever district council elections. A number of precisely defined and related institutional and financial reforms are contained in the decentralisation of Ethiopia's regional states. Since 2002, all over the country, the zonal level administration has been abolished or curtailed; block grants allocated directly to the *wereda* councils have been introduced; and civil servants have been transferred from federal and regional offices to the districts. The ultimate goal of this exercise, whose implementation is ongoing, is to enable the districts to control, allocate and manage block grants on their own (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003). However, implementing these tasks in the context of the Somali region proves an arduous challenge. More than simply reorganising an existing bureaucracy, decentralisation in region 5 has become synonymous with an effort to expand administration into the rural areas. Hitherto, political conditions in the region have not encouraged internal state building especially in the so-called 'insecure' parts of the region - where the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) controls the bush and the Ethiopian national army the towns - and where the civilian administration is overshadowed and effectively run by the army (Khalif & Doornbos 2002).

The Somali region's parliament, the State Council, functions primarily as an organ that elects and impeaches regional presidents. Since its inception it developed little ambition to actually legislate. So far the assembly neither harmonized state-law with the widely practiced Somali customary law nor did it formulate a sensible framework for pastoral resource management. In 2002, the council adopted a revised version of the regional constitution that had been produced in a short time span. Apart from some minor changes, the document represents almost an identical replica of the federal constitution (SRS 2002). Courts have been set up in all the districts of the region over the past ten years, yet legal personnel is very few despite the establishment of a government management institute in Jijiga. Qualified civil servants prefer to stay in the region's capital, Jijiga, where living conditions are more convenient and comfortable. As an official report openly admits, 'in nearly all cases, the educated class prefers not to get its hands dirty by being assigned to and work in rural areas' (IPS 2002). Ever since the transfer of the regional capital

from Gode to Jijiga (Markakis 1996), the latter had become home to a majority of the 5000 civil servants employed by the Somali region.

The planned shift of the control over budgetary resources from Jijiga to the districts also encounters a number of financial management problems. A recent World Bank (2003a) financial accountability assessment outlines some of the factors that limited the financial independence of local governments so far. First, the regional state is highly dependent on federal subsidies including external loans and grants. The 2002/2003 budget of Birr 495 million for example consisted of 7 percent regional revenue and 93 percent federal contribution. Second, budget allocation and management has always been heavily centralised and implemented through a top-down process. Each of the region's 41 sector bureaus based in the regional capital manages and executes its own budget and expenditure directly and through their respective zonal counterparts. These in turn undertake the same tasks in their respective zones and the districts that are part of it. Third, Somali region so far lacks the necessary banking services required for decentralised public finance; Jijiga, Degehabur, Qabridahar, and Gode are the only towns where the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia has a presence.

Development curtailed

The failure to decentralise became both a cause and an effect of the lack of tangible progress in infrastructure development during the past decade. This not only holds true when comparing the Somali region's record to progress achieved, during the same period, in the highlands, but region 5 also lags behind its ecologically and economically more similar neighbours: Somaliland, Puntland and southern Somalia. For instance, while the remnants of the Somali Democratic Republic enjoyed a dramatic expansion of telecommunications and internet technology since the mid-1990s, Ethiopia's Somali hinterland remains digitally disconnected with only five out of 70 towns possessing automatic telephone communication. The extension of the mobile phone network to Jijiga in mid-2004 hardly measures up to the gigantic task of providing basic communication to region 5. According to data provided by the region's Investment Office, the region's road network currently exists of 1,629 km of all weather roads and 2,844 km of dry weather roads (IPS 2002). As a result of the expanding distribution network of the booming *khat* trade the off-road network is constantly growing. A number of new health clinics have been constructed and rehabilitated in recent years, some with support from international donors. However, few of them are operational, as qualified medical personnel are in short supply and most districts lack the necessary budget for recurrent costs. While the construction of health facilities involves awarding contracts, there seems to be no incentive to operate these facilities once they are built. Statistically, there is one health centre for 359,840 people and one health station for 45,549 people in region 5 (IPS 2002). Other urgently required services such as education, animal health service delivery, access to clean water, or provision of electricity all enjoy trifling existence within the region's 300,000 square km territory.

In the past decade ambitious large-scale development projects either dissolved gradually or did not go beyond the planning phase. An example of the first is the former South-Eastern Rangeland Project (SERP) that was jointly funded by the African Development Bank and the Government of Ethiopia. Between 1989 and 1996 it implemented numerous activities and construction works improving animal health, rangeland resources, and the general infrastructure within the region. Due to its bottom-up approach and emphasis on technical solutions, SERP quickly became 'the most prevalent government organization in the remote areas with the most recognition by the

pastoral community' (Shank 1996). After phasing out SERP's workforce and assets including vehicles, heavy machinery and buildings were transferred to the region's Bureau of Agriculture. Today, the project's infrastructure is in shambles and former staff and government bureaucrats have appropriated most property. The gradual dissolution of SERP is a dramatic but rather typical example of the trajectory development projects embark on in region 5. The Gode state farm and associated irrigation schemes are another case in point. Initially, all development schemes vow to improve pastoral livelihoods and agro-pastoral production. Ultimately, however, they almost always fuel competition among contending clan groups and often disappear in the urban-based networks of politicians and government appointed clan representatives.

The Calub and Hilala gas fields located in Shilabo district of Korahe zone represent another development opportunity with a high potential for revenue generation. An estimated four trillion cubic feet of gas and 13.6 million barrels of associated liquids had been discovered in the Calub area in 1972. After the Derg's downfall, the government and 460 private investors established the Calub Gas S.C., with a 95% and 5% stake respectively, to develop the Somali region's gas fields. Despite numerous agreements and announcements of the impending construction of refineries and pipelines, little advancement occurred on the ground. In 1999 Calub Gas S.C. signed a memorandum of understanding for prospective exploitation with the American oil company Sidor. The joint venture, Gasoil Ethiopia Project (GEP), optimistically foresaw the start of production in September 2002 (Reuters 1999). After this announcement fears were raised of looming deals being cut at national level to the disadvantage of the region's inhabitants' legitimate claims over its mineral resources (Khalif 2000). However, in August 2001 the World Bank suspended its 66 million dollar loan to Calub Gas S.C. in an effort to accelerate the latter's privatisation (Addis Fortune 2001). The following year, the Calub Gas S. C. shareholders committed themselves to a new joint venture for the construction of four refinery and petroleum extraction plants, this time with the Russian oil company Methanol (Addis Fortune 2002). In December 2003, Ambassador Mohamoud Dirir, chairman of the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP) and head of the federal Ministry of Mines, announced yet another deal with the Jordanian company Si Tech International (SIL). The agreement involved a 25-year concession for SIL who promised to invest 1.5 billion dollars. Only half a year later doubts were cast over SIL's technical know-how and financial potential after it failed to pay Dirir's ministry a bonus of one million dollars for 'training programs' (The Reporter 2004). As an epilogue in the unsuccessful saga of the Calub Gas S.C., the Council of Ministers decided to liquidate the shareholder company in September 2004 and established United Petroleum S.C. as its successor. Consequently, numerous private shareholders refused to join this new company as they had lost confidence in the partnership with the government (Addis Fortune 2004).

2004 district council elections

As a prerequisite for decentralisation, district council elections had initially been scheduled to take place in Somali Region in 2001. Due to drought and political turmoil within the region's government they were repeatedly postponed. On January 25, 2004 voters in the Somali region elected, for the first time, a council for their respective districts. Prior to that the districts' institutional set-up consisted solely of an executive organ, the district administration that was led by a chairman and a vice-chairman. Members of the zonal and the regional administrations habitually appointed, on grounds of party loyalty and/or genealogical affiliation, these *wereda* administrators. District elections in region 5 thus finally introduced representative institutions and limited electoral competition at district and *kebele* levels. On election day, the electorate of 46

districts cast their votes in 1330 polling stations all over the Somali region. According to statistics provided by the National Election Board, a total of 978,611 voters participated in the polls (NEB 2004). Elections were postponed after political tensions appeared in Erer, Dambel, and Jijiga districts all of which are situated in the region's northern Jijiga and Shinille zones. The official reason for suspension was 'the imbalance in tribal set-up and obstacles in representation of clan members' (WIC 2004a). Unconfirmed sources reported that elections in Jijiga district had been postponed after it was discovered that supporters of the ruling SPDP had illegally received ballot papers. Problems in Dambel *wereda* were linked to disagreements between different lineages of the Ise (Dir) clan. The Ise clan enjoys representation in the region's highest political office since their Abdi Jibril Abubaker took over as acting head of the regional government in July 2003.

The Somali region's first elections to the regional assembly in 1992 have been perceived as a remarkable example of political pluralism (Markakis 1994). A dozen years later, the 2004 *wereda* elections evoked the impression of a de facto one party state under the flagship of the SPDP. Out of a total of 3309 district councillors elected across the Somali region, 3182 belong to the SPDP (96.2 percent), 21 to the Western Somali Democratic Party (WSDP) (0.6 percent), and 106 are independent (3.2 percent). A tenth of all candidates elected are women. Not only did the SPDP successfully mobilize voters through its government-aided machinery, there was almost no opposition party to speak of. The WSDP's political weight proved marginal. Established in 1994, the party is chaired by Hirsi Dool and represents a platform for politicians that either disfavour the SPDP or had left their original political party. Similarly, the Somali Democratic Forces (SoDAF) that had won three parliamentary seats in the 2000 elections for the regional State Council decided to withdraw from the 2004 elections. Meanwhile the historic political organization of region 5 and former ruling party (1991-1994), the ONLF, celebrated its 20th anniversary in the bush where it had withdrawn to after its gradual alienation from the EPRDF.

Independent monitoring of the January 2004 polls was almost insignificant and limited to Shinille zone, the most easily accessible part of the Somali region. At the invitation of the National Election Board a six-member observation team representing Western Embassies in Addis Ababa observed the board's preparations and election proceedings at five polling stations within Shinille district. The mission's verdict on the fairness of the elections was ambiguous. The observers criticized a number of unlawful practices that gave the SPDP a considerable advantage over its contenders (Flens 2004). The Ethiopian Human Rights Council who had assigned 21 observers across Shinille zone issued a more critical report. The EHRCO concluded that candidates were nominated on the basis of their position within their respective clans and their economic status. The human rights watchdog detected disciplinary problems on the part of the voters. It also reported arrests, harassment, and intimidation of opposition candidates before - and a number of other malpractices during - election day on the part of the government (EHRCO 2004).

The 2004 district council elections represent the latest phase in the changing relation between collective interests expressed on clan basis and the political architecture within region 5. At the beginning, Somali regional political parties were visibly clan-based and institutional politics was accordingly fragmented. Nine different political parties had participated in the June 1992 elections of the regional parliament. National and regional elections of 1995 and 2000 were both contested by three political parties and illustrated the exclusion of the ONLF from the formal political arena. However, it would be wrong to assume that inter-clan competition diminished over the past decade. Rather competition for access to public office and material resources relocated into, and is played out within, the dominant ruling party - initially the ESDL (1994-

1998) and later on the SPDP (1998-today) - which is the sole political organization sanctioned by the EPRDF (Samatar 2004). Far from being a united force, the ruling SPDP degenerated into an amalgam of centrifugal political interests in recent years and has been ridden by factional infighting. In addition, the March 2004 death of its former chairman, the highly respected Abdulmejid Hussein (Cliffe et al. 2004), deprived the party of an integrative personality respected by the federal government. In anticipation of the 2005 national elections, a new political party was established in July 2004 representing the communities settled along the Shebelle and Genale (Juba) rivers. 'Dilwabi', the new party, draws its main support from the minority Rer Barre (Somalised Bantu) as well as some of its neighbouring clans who share its agricultural mode of production.

An elusive goal

Upon completion of the elections, the members of the district council elected a spokesperson, a vice-spokesperson, a chairman and a vice-chairman for their *wereda*. The formal political conditions had thus been achieved to transfer manpower and budget from Jijiga to the district level. At this point of conjuncture, the federal government had become increasingly annoyed with what it considered as a nepotistic and irresponsible regional elite. To that end, the head of the Ministry of Federal Affairs Abay Tsehaye pressed the SPDP to quickly decentralise. This build-up of pressure on the region was also driven by international donors who identified mismanagement as the major hindrance to their interventions in the region. In particular, the World Bank, which currently implements a vast pastoral development programme in south-eastern Ethiopia, had lobbied for decentralisation in order to implement its community-based projects (World Bank 2003b). Consequently, in July 2004 the federal government confronted Jijiga with an abrupt ultimatum; if the region were not to decide on an effective transfer of its civil servants to the districts and agree on a formula for budget allocation within one month, the federal government would suspend the regional state (WIC 2004b).

The danger of an imminent loss of autonomy under the direction of the federal government was well understood by the region's politicians. Through June and July a flurry of activities ensued; the ruling SPDP conducted an auto-evaluation (*gim gema*), a series of consultations was organized by the Ministry of Federal Affairs in the region's capital and bureau heads were sent to their home areas to secure, among feuding groups, a cessation of hostilities where clan conflicts had occurred. Finally, the State Council in August 2004 decided that slightly more than half of the region's budget will, in future, be allocated directly to the newly constituted district authorities. Furthermore it assigned close to 700 civil servants who used to work in the regional offices to different positions at *wereda* level. There they will be in charge of elaborating and proposing interventions on behalf of the district councils who will approve and fund their proposals autonomously. In parallel, there were plans to establish at least one sub-branch of the Ethiopian Commercial Bank in all of the region's nine zones.

While these developments are indicators of the willingness by the Somali region to, after all, decentralise, considerable doubt arises as to its chances for success. This is notably the case when bearing in mind the past difficulties to expand local administration in Ethiopia's Somali periphery. Additionally, the unwillingness of civil servants to dislocate to inhospitable locations, the fact that a large portion of region 5 is controlled by the anti-government ONLF, and the lack of an apolitical bureaucracy all render decentralised institution-building an elusive goal. While the 2004 district council elections represent an important step towards more representative

government at local level, accountability of elected officials *vis-à-vis* the population rather than the party system will be necessary to render district administrations legitimate and relevant in the eyes of the region's inhabitants.

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