

Can the Young Despots in Somali Regional State Reconcile With the Diaspora Communities?

Ibrahim Yusuf
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This week, officials from the Somali Regional State (SRS) of Ethiopia, arranged their luggage to visit various countries in Europe, Middle-East and Northern America. They started their visit in Stockholm, Sweden on 13th of August. The aim of this tour is to win the hearts and the minds of the region's Diaspora who seem to be very desperate about the situation of their homeland and how it was governed by these young leaders. In many decades, Ethiopian relations with its Somali-ethnic Diaspora have been shaped by animosity. The G20 summit in London demonstrated how the region's Diaspora communities are opposing the current regime in Ethiopia and its puppet leadership in the SRS, consequently, Ethiopian government mandated President Daud and his administration to confront and influence their Diaspora communities, they have been equipped various video-clips and posters about the 'development and economic growth' in the region. However the question that begs an answer is can they accomplish their mission? The answer of this question could be elicited from the following paragraphs of this paper in which I will try to illustrate the situation in SRS.

Despite there was a dramatic transformation in most of the regional states in Ethiopia SRS is characterized by poor governance, political corruption and economic mess. According to a various sectoral reports published by the federal government and various humanitarian organizations people in the region remain to face the worst security and economic problems in the country after nearly two decades of its autonomous administration; they rely on the lowest health and education coverage rates; potable water is a dream for 95% of population including the inhabitants of the region's capital Jigjiga; most of the graduates are unemployed; poor infrastructure also is a well-known character and a title that the region has been defending since it was established.

To overcome such heartbreaking concerns the region needs; elected, experienced and transparent leaders, who are accountable to their constituencies, unfortunately, people in the region trapped under the reign of young and ruthless leadership handpicked by *Ato Towelde*, an envoy of Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) to SRS. Most of the cabinet members are in their 30s and graduates from some of the prestigious universities in Europe, Australia and South-West Asia, where they witnessed how rule of law, freedom of speech and good governance contributed economic prosperity and social justice. However, they are very enthusiastic to engage and/or lead the most feared authoritarian regional state in Ethiopia. In the region power abuse and corruption is a merit and normal practice, this encouraged its officials to use government vehicles as luxury cars for their families and personal comfort. Similarly, although, they own the most expensive and luxurious properties in Jigjiga yet they maintain to receive 1500 Birr per month from the public treasury as a top-up salary for house rent, at the same time, most of them live in public houses known as locally *Qodabe*! About five million population in SRS have no local press including Social-Oriented newspapers; international media also has no presence in this war-torn region. Non-Governmental

Organizations (NGOs) face severe restriction in a daily base — their movement from one District to another needs permission letter from military generals in Harar; the operations of some organizations including International Committee for Red Cross (ICRC), Medicines Sans Frontiers (MSF) and most of the local NGOs such as Hope for the Horn and Ogaden Welfare Society were suspended. The fate of elders and intellectuals who tries to criticize the policies of the youth led government will be atrocious and they immediately end up behind the bars or they will be forced to flee the country.

As an insider and civil servant I witnessed how horrible and terrified is working with these young tyrant and totalitarian leadership. For example, all civil servants are expected to join and be active members of the region's ruling party Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP); they must deduct monthly predetermined percentage from their salary to finance the party; they must also actively engage activities against insurgents including night patrolling, working as informants and hiring militias from respective clans. The brutal leadership in the region skillfully conspire against any employee they feel that he/she is not fulfilling the above requirements and they will be subject to be humiliated in one of the notorious prisons in the region. In addition to that arbitrary dismissal of civil servants as a result of nepotism is a talk of the day. Many professionals who served the regional sector bodies and gained valuable knowledge and expertise which the region highly needs are now either unemployed or moved to UN agencies and NGOs, ironically, some of them were **banned** totally to work in the region!

In October 2008, the Addis Ababa based newspaper *The Reporter* published an article in which they criticized leaders in the region of 'being a burden on the people'. The article underlined continuous hostility between them particularly among the executive committees of the SPDP; it also demonstrated the failure of their development and security policies which become a constant catastrophe for the federal government. After nearly all annual review meetings and parliament sessions they publicly admit the failure of their plans they designed to 'help' the poverty-trapped people in the region which they were governing at least for the last ten years, when the first batch of these young leaders graduated from Ethiopian Civil Service College.

Resignation to allow the citizens in the region to elect different leaders who might deliver better and sustainable development policies would have been the best offer that they could give their people, instead they cover-up their failure by allegations and counter allegations among them, therefore, in SRS it is business as usual for the higher officials to accuse each other of being anti-peace supporter and/or rent seeking behavior and then claim that they have cleared the bad-boys from the administration, as a result of that, political instability become one of the region's major characteristics.

Several federal reports of the last five years' public performance also underlining how SRS is performing behind all regional states including Gambela, Afar and Benishangul-gumuz regional states in terms of the implementation of the nation-wide programs including; District Level Decentralization Program (DLDP), Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) and Public Sector Capacity Program (PSCAP), Most of the prominent authors on the region also pointed out how the people in the region remain to suffer from widespread corruption and lack of transparency in the public sector, yet the more tragic is — contrary to the other regions — severe

underutilization of millions of dollars of such generously financed programs which are designed to promote good governance in the country in general and regional states in particular.

Any observer who manages to visit Jigjiga, the dusty capital city and one of the only few accessible districts in the region, could notice the level of underdevelopment despite of annual budget which is more than 150 million of US dollars; it is observable how prisons are overcrowded and how people are terrorized by their young and educated despots. For example, the end of 2008 Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) killed paramilitary militiaman in a Horakhalifo village nearby Jigjiga, consequently, region's notorious militia with the help of national military responded by slaughtering 47 elders from Yaasuf an Abaskul subclan who live in the village, this happened after a merciless proclamation passed by the SRS parliament which 'allows and encourages' the punishment of any clan who inhabit areas where insurgent members operate. This caused an outrage — a first of its kind — from the members of the federal parliament elected from the SRS who met with PM Meles Zenawi to furiously demand an immediate action against this massacre. It also led the removal of deputy speaker of the SRS parliament, Suldan Abdirahman Bade, who is also a traditional leader of Abaskul clan, after his public demand for an investigation of the case.

In May 2009 Ethiopian House of Federation (EHF) unanimously voted for a bill in which they underlined how the regimes in the SRS systematically discriminated and ignored the rights of shekash and Dubo clans in the region. EHF also proposed an argent roadmap to meet socioeconomic and political needs of these long-term marginalized communities. However, dictators in Jigjiga responded by arresting 10 elders of Shekash clan from Raaso area who are now serving 3-11 years of imprisonment.

One of the most unforgettable crimes that these SPDP leaders committed against their people is the facilitation of the annexation of the most strategic, fertile and urbanized districts in SRS to Oromia Regional State (ORS). The annexation of the Somali territories started by the division of the well-known Somali city of Diredaba to Oromo and Somali people. In 2005 election, despite an enormous support from the EPRDF, Oromo population in the city failed to secure their parliament seat from Diredaba, instead a member from the opposition party of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) particularly from Amhara population in the city win the seat, whilst Somalis in the city secured their seat. Prior to the 2005 election both Diredaba seats were won by the Somalis. As a result of that, in the first session of the Ethiopian parliament, Junadin Zadu, Oromia's former President and current Minister of Defense, furiously stated that Somalis have no right to be elected from Diredaba by claiming that the city historically belongs to the ORS, calmly, Ambassador Mohamud Dirir, Minister of Culture and Tourism responded by declaring that the 'Deredaba belongs to God'. Dirir's statement made Somali people in the region very disappointed more than ever — it was a nightmare to witness how our only full minister in the federal government facilitated the invasion on one of our historic cities. It clearly shows that most of the Somali leadership in Ethiopia is nothing but shortsighted mercenaries who are indifferent about the future of their constituencies.

More territories followed the footsteps of Diredaba, with a generous help from the SRS administration the federal government and ORS continuously conspire against the Somali

people. The appropriation of many districts to ORS including Babile, Fayanbiro, Arjisagora, Jinacsani and Ma'ayso made many intellectuals more apprehensive about the EPRDF's policies toward Somali people. Unfortunately, SRS leader's effort to facilitate the intention ORS to takeover additional districts such as Moyale, attracted other neighboring region of Afar Regional State, which in 2008 claimed some territories in Shinile Zone of the defenseless SRS. In April 2009, the Afar ambitions was the major reason that led to the resignation — a first of its kind — of the Vice President of SRS, Hassan Abdulahi Riyale, a move that left the region without vice president in the last five months.

The above mentioned crimes among others are a vital wakeup call for the region's Diaspora, International community and human rights organization to act against this tyrant leadership who are proud to commit additional crimes against humanity and values of the civilized world.

Finally, it is conceivable that the way out to overcome region's devastating problems will be neither to fabricate development images which never existed in the region to mislead the Diaspora communities who might know the situation on the ground more than the juvenile despots in the region nor to waste public money by visiting the tourist attractions of London, Dubai and Minneapolis. Hence, the immediate and necessary actions to be considered — **if the young dictators are ready to reconcile with their Diaspora communities** — is first to accept the presence of international media such as BBC, Aljazeera and VOA in the region because crimes against humanity, political corruption and development achievements should be presented to the outside world and second they must accept the establishment of an independent truth and reconciliation committee which is very essential measurement for reconciliation.

** Ibrahim Yusuf is former civil servant of various sector bureaux in the region and currently works with international NGO and can be reached at yusufcago@yahoo.com*