Somalia's Proxy Wars:
Who is Manipulating Whom?[1]

Matt Bryden

December 2019

DIPLOMATIE No. 54 | DECEMBER 2019 – JANUARY 2020 | PAGE 76 - 77[1]

https://www.areion24.news/produit/les-grands-dossiers-de-diplomatie-n-54/

On 19 August 2019, near the southern Somali port town of Kismayo, soldiers from the Kenyan and Ethiopian armies faced off warily against one another at point blank range down the barrels of their guns. The two countries have been strategic allies for over half a century, mainly to contain a perceived common threat from Somalia. Their forces both wear the insignia of the African Union peace support operation in that country, AMISOM; they fall under command of the same headquarters in Mogadishu; and they face a common enemy -- the Al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group, Al-Shabaab. So how did they find themselves in a heavily armed standoff – just a hair-trigger away from opening fire on one another at a torrid, dust-blown checkpoint in a country they have both come to assist?

The quarrel between the two forces concerned the presidential election of the Jubaland State of Somalia, scheduled to take place early the following month. Ahmed Mohamed Islam 'Madoobe', the incumbent, was widely expected to win. Kenya, whose forces had fought side-by-side with Madoobe's militias to liberate Kismayo from Al-Shabaab in 2012, and have protected his embryonic administration ever since, favoured continuity of his leadership. Ethiopia, on the other hand, was firmly aligned with the Somali Federal Government (SFG) in Mogadishu, which was determined to remove Madoobe and replace him with a loyalist.

Addis Ababa was suspected of colluding with Mogadishu to prevent Madoobe's re-election -- by force if necessary. Less than a year earlier, in December 2018, Ethiopian forces had intervened in a presidential election in Baidoa, the capital of Somalia's South West State, arresting the front runner, Mukhtar Roobow, in order to pave the way for the SFG's preferred candidate. Roobow's seizure and subsequent detention without charge or trial triggered public protests in Baidoa in which police gunned down 16 protesters.

In mid-August 2019, as the date of the Jubaland election approached, Addis Ababa sent a high-level delegation to Kismayo to warn Madoobe that he must either step down or would be forcibly removed. Just days later, when Ethiopian troops suddenly deployed to Kismayo airport in order to receive an inbound Ethiopian military aircraft carrying reinforcements, Madoobe and his Kenyan allies had little doubt that another Roobow-style abduction was about to unfold. Kenyan army units based at the airport, buttressed by Jubaland Security Forces, blocked the gates with armoured vehicles and battle wagons, and denied the Ethiopian aircraft permission to land.

Ethiopia's undisguised hostility towards Madoobe represented an abrupt volte-face from its previous posture as his ally. For over two decades, Addis Ababa had been a staunch advocate of federalism in Somalia and one of the driving forces behind the adoption of a federal constitution in 2004. But many Somalis remained resistant to the notion of federalism, and it was not until 2012 that the federal system finally began to take shape, with the emergence of several new provinces or "federal member states" (FMS) in the south of the country – including Jubaland. While the SFG sought to centralise power and resources in Mogadishu, Ethiopia vigorously defended and the supported the embryonic FMS, both on the ground and through robust international diplomacy.[2]

[1] This article was first published in French under the title "Guerres par Procuration en Somalie: Qui Manipule Qui?" in *Diplomatie: Les Grands Dossiers,* No. 54, Décembre 2019 – Janvier 2020.
https://www.areion24.news/produit/les-grands-dossiers-de-diplomatie-n-54/

[2] Ethiopia also supported local militia groups opposed to Al-Shabaab including Mukhtar Roobow and his fighters, before turning against Roobow and arresting him in 2018.

But 2017 witnessed changes of government in both Somalia and Ethiopia. Under President Mohamed Abdillahi Farmaajo, Somalia's new federal authorities acted aggressively to centralise power and marginalise the FMS. Meanwhile, Ethiopia's new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, moved rapidly to embrace Farmaajo, implicitly endorsing his government's centralist agenda and suspending Ethiopian support to the FMS. Madoobe, like Roobow before him, found himself brusquely abandoned as a trusted ally and re-branded as an unreformed terrorist.

The confrontation between Kenyan and Ethiopian troops outside Kismayo airport was emblematic of much broader geopolitical shifts in the Horn of Africa and the wider region. Since 2014, competition has spiked as the Gulf States split into opposing camps led by Saudi Arabia and the United Araba Emirates (UAE) on one side and Qatar on the other. The UAE has obtained concessions for ports along the southern coast of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden while Turkey – and ally of Qatar – obtained control over Mogadishu port and airport and eyed a possible military base on the Sudanese island of Suakin. Following the election of President Farmaajo in Somalia in 2017, Qatar rapidly emerged as the federal government's principal patron. But the UAE, which had previously backed the FMS in coordination with Ethiopia, appears to have become discouraged by Addis Ababa's sudden change of heart and ceded Somalia to Doha – at least for the time being.

Western governments, for the most part, have paid lip service to the need for consultation, co-operation and inclusive politics in Somalia while deferring to the FGS in its attempts to centralise power and subordinate the FMS. Mogadishu's interference in state elections, its failure to respect agreements on national security, its unilateral concession of oil exploration and fishing rights to foreign companies despite the absence of a Constitutional or legal basis to do so, and its determination to complete the constitutional review and electoral law without political participation by the FMS have so far gone unchallenged.

There is no question that external influences, including the tumultuous events across the region, have impacted Somalia. But they have only highlighted and deepened existing divisions – not created them. After more than four decades of uninterrupted civil conflict, the Somali crisis remains fundamentally unresolved. No victor has emerged nor has a comprehensive peace agreement been attained: the current Provisional Constitution, which could potentially serve as the basis for such an accord, is silent on many key aspects of federalism, stipulating only that areas of contention should be resolved through dialogue and negotiation between the FGS and FMS.

The administration of President 'Farmaajo', was widely expected to lead this dialogue process, convening the FMS leadership to conduct an inclusive constitutional review, clarify aspects of the federal system such as distribution of power, rights, revenues, resources, security sector governance etc., and continue consultations to develop a workable electoral system. Instead, it has effectively discarded the Provisional Constitution, subverted the FMS and embarked on an aggressive campaign to dismantle federalism – in whole or in part -- in favour of an autocratic, unitary model of governance. Internationally supervised agreements with the FMS on how to jointly rebuild Somalia's security services have been transformed into an immensely expensive, ineffective and corrupt project for the exclusive benefit of the FGS. As a result, the FMS have become enfeebled and embattled, struggling to defeat Al-Shabaab on one front while fighting rear-guard actions against Mogadishu on another.

Even more disturbing is the prospect of Farmaajo's administration securing for itself another term of office. The SFG is currently working to complete a National Elections Law by the end of 2019 and a constitutional review by June 2020. The draft electoral law alters the process of election of

the president and establishes a loophole that would permit the incumbent parliament and president to extend their terms of office indefinitely. A brazenly rigged election or a unilateral extension of the current government would risk plunging the country back into conflict.

It has become routine – event trite – to ascribe Somalia's internal problems to the interference of foreign states and the spill over of the Gulf crisis into the Horn. The geopolitics of the region complicate the prospects of a solution to Somalia's crisis, but they are not its cause, nor should they be used to obfuscate responsibility for a crisis of Somali leaders' own making. Qatar's finances and Ethiopian military support help to nurture Farmaajo's autocratic instincts, but they are not responsible for his refusal to accommodate other legitimate Somali political forces, nor his failure to respect previous agreements.

Somalia is indeed engaged in a proxy war, but it is a conflict waged from the inside out. External actors do exploit Somali differences for their own purposes, but far more toxic is the tendency of rival Somali leaders to rely on external support as an alternative to internal accommodation and compromise. If Farmaajo and his backers mistake international recognition and foreign aid as substitutes for domestic approval and legitimacy, then Somalia is headed back into a war for which no rationale – whether civil, proxy or counter-terrorism – will absolve the real perpetrators of their culpability.