
The Benishangul-Gumuz Region: A Brief Political History, 1991-2001

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Abstract

This paper attempts to reconstruct the political history of the Benishangul-Gumuz region from 1991 to 2001. To give a background for the study, the paper begins with an overview of the Sheikdoms of Aqoldi (Asossa), Bela-Shangul proper, and Khomosha in the Barta inhabited area to the South of the Abbay (Blue Nile) River, and Gubba in Gumuz inhabited area to the north of the river, which flourished long before the Ethiopian Empire expanded to the region. The Barta dominated the Bela-shangul sheikdoms, whereas the Gumuz were ruled either under the Gubba polity or under their ethnic political organization where the elders were the highest authority. The study argues that although the Barta and the Gumuz have many cultural and physical similarities and speak a Nilo-Saharan language family, the two dominant ethnic groups of the region never had a common administrative experience until the Bela-Shangul and the Gumuz inhabited areas were merged to form the “Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State” after the 1991 change of government and establishment of new governance in Ethiopia. It also insists that during the first decade of its establishment, the Benishangul-Gumuz region remained politically fragile due to the lack of a well-developed inter-ethnic relationship, mainly among the Barta of Bela-Shangul and the Gumuz, whose predominant settlement regions were naturally separated by the Abbay River.

Keywords: Benishangul-Gumuz, Barta, Gumuz, region, state, conflict.

An Overview of the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State and Its Peoples

The Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State is located in the northwestern part of Ethiopia. It shares common boundaries in the west with the Sudan, in the northeast with the Amhara National Regional State, in the east and the south with the National Regional State of Oromiya.² The Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State comprises three administrative zones namely: *Mātākkāl* in the north, Asossa in the center and Kamashi in the

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² Wendy James et al (eds.), *Remapping Ethiopia Socialism & After*, Oxford: James Curry, 2002, p. Xiii.

south.³ The Region has twenty *wārādas* (out of which two are special *wārādas*). The headquarters of the national regional state is found in Asossa town.

A mosaic of ethnic groups with their own distinct languages, cultures, and socio-economic formation has long inhabited the Benishangul-Gumuz region. According to the 1994 Population and Housing Census report, the region was estimated to have 460,459 peoples⁴ clearly composed of diverse ethnic groups. This document provides a thumbnail sketch of the major ethnic groups of the region with their percentage as follows: Barta 26.7 %, Gumuz 23.4 %, Amhara 22.2 %, Oromo 12.8 %, Shinasha 6.9 %, and others 8.0 %.⁵ The region's constitution has recognized the Barta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao and Khomo ethnic groups as owner nationalities of the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State.⁶ It is noteworthy that Amharic is the working language of the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State.⁷ The religious composition of the peoples of the region is Islam 44.1 %, Orthodox Christianity 34.8 %, indigenous religions 13.1 %, and Protestantism of different denominations 5.8%.⁸ It is important to note that the source material discloses nothing about the religion of the remaining 2.2 % of the region's population.

The peoples of the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State predominantly practice agriculture as their major means of economic existence.⁹ This was substantiated by other means of livelihood, albeit they have minor importance, like trade, hunting and fishing.¹⁰ The peoples also washed gold from the various streams which are tributaries of the Abbay River as source of income.¹¹ The Gumuz and other indigenous peoples of the region have a limited number of cattle due to tsetse fly and other pests, which are prevalent in the lowland areas of the region.¹² Perhaps due to this or other

³The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia Results for Benishangul-Gumuz Region, Vol. II, Analytical Report, Addis Ababa: Central Statistical Authority, 1999, p. 6.

⁴*Ibid.*, p.5.

⁵*Ibid.*, p.35.

⁶“*Yä Benishangul-Gumuz Biherawi Kililawi Māngist Higa-Mangist*”, Asossa, Sane 24, 1984 E.C., p. 1.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*The 1994 Population and Housing Census...*, p.45.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp.106-108.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹ For the age-old practice of gold washing particularly among the Gumuz society see FO/371/15389, Confidential, R.E Cheesman, “The Abbay: Second Reconnaissance via Wambara and Roseires”, 1929, p.2.

¹²*Ibid.*; FO/371/15387, Sir S. Barton to Mr. J.H. Harris, 30 April 1931, p. 72.

cultural factors, the indigenous peoples of the region plough their land not with draught animals but by digging using simple handy tools.¹³

The Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State is one of the peripheral and the least developed parts of the country. The indigenous peoples of the region were historically peripheral to the Ethiopian state and hence they were politically marginalized from the national politics. The region has very poor infrastructure and logistic facilities. The road that connected Asossa with the Federal capital, Addis Ababa, was apparently jerrybuilt and thence made the Benishangul-Gumuz Region less accessible and remote from the center. Moreover, the regional state has also inadequate intra-regional road network. For instance, in order to travel from Asossa to the capital of the Matakali Administrative zone, Pawe, it used to require a peregrination through, Naqamte (Wallaga), Bure-Damot (Gojjam) and Chagni.¹⁴ Finally, this paper has wittingly provided the above regional glimpse on the peoples and economic situation of the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State because, as it will become evident later, they had tremendous impact on the political development of the region during the period under discussion.

The Benishangul-Gumuz Region to 1991

The area what is today called the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State had small chiefdoms that flourished in the South and North of the Abbay long before the Ethiopian state expanded to the region. The chiefdoms were: Aqoldi (Asossa), Belashangul proper, and Khomosha¹⁵ in the Barta inhabited area to the South of the Abbay, and Gubba¹⁶ in Gumuz country to the North of the river. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the paramount rulers of the region were: *Sheikh* Khojele al-Hassan of Aqoldi, Mahmud of Khomosha, Abdal-Rahman Khojele of Bela-Shangul proper¹⁷ and Manjil Hamdan Abu

¹³Shibabaw Wole, “*Ya Gojjam Kifla-Hagar Biherasaboch Bahilawi Gatsita*”, Bahir Dar, 1981 E.C., p. 16.

¹⁴*Abiyotawi Demokrasi*, Year 8, No. 11, *Miyazia* 11, 1990 E.C.

¹⁵ Alessandro Triulzi, *Salt, Gold and Legitimacy Prelude to the History of a No-man’s Land, Bela Shangul, Wallaga, Ethiopia (Ca. 1800-1898)*, Napoli: Instituto Universitario Orientale, 1981, p. 84.

¹⁶ Wendy James, “From Aborigines to Frontier Society on Western Ethiopia”, in Donald Donham and Wendy James (eds.), *Working Papers on Society and History in Imperial Ethiopia: The Southern Periphery from the 1880s to 1974*. Cambridge: African Studies Centre, 1976, p. 121.

¹⁷Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, London: James Curry, 1991, pp. 66- 68.

Shok of Gubba.¹⁸ They were strongly influenced by Arab and Muslim immigrants from the direction of the Sudan.¹⁹ In this regard, the half-caste *Witawit* claim descent from the marriage association between the ruling families of the Barta and Arab Muslim preachers who emigrated from Sudan.

The chiefdoms of the region experienced the political domination or rule of the Funj Kingdom of Sennar, in what later came to be known as the Sudan, (1500-1821), the Turco-Egyptian (1822-1882) and the Mahdists (1882-89).²⁰ The last foreign power in the region, the Mahdists, exercised political control over the Belashangul area south of the Abbay River and penetrated further deep into the interior until their advance was checked by *Ras* Gobena at the Battle of Gute Dille in 1888.²¹ However, the final evacuation of the Mahdists from the land of Belashangul was completed when the chiefs of the area created a military alliance and drove the Mahdists out in the early 1890s.²²

Subsequently, both the Barta and Gumuz traditional rulers operating their own forms of government without domination and intervention from the central government of Ethiopia up until 1898. It was in this milieu that *Ras* Makonnen and *Negus Tāklā-Haymanot* marched to the Belashangul and Gumuz country to annex and to establish more closer and direct control over the areas, respectively. Like the other peripheral regions of the country, the Benishangul-Gumuz region was entirely incorporated into the Ethiopian state in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Divergent interpretations have been advanced in attempts to reconstruct the history of Ethiopia's imperial expansion to the peripheral lands.²³ But this paper substantiates the argument that European or colonial powers encroachment from the direction of the Sudan was the driving factor behind the Ethiopian state expansion to the

¹⁸ For detail see Peter P. Garretson, "Manjil Hamdan Abu Shok (1898-1938) and the Administration of Gubba", in Joseph Tubiana (ed.), *Modern Ethiopia: From the Accession of Menelik II to the Present*, Rotterdam, 1980, pp. 197-210.

¹⁹ Abdussamad H. Ahmad, "Trading in Slaves in Bela-Shangul and Gumuz, Ethiopia: Border Enclaves in History", *Journal of African History*, Vol.40, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 433-34.

²⁰ Wendy James, "From Aborigines to...", p. 121.

²¹ Triulzi, p. 161; 165-66.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 152-53.

²³ To mention: Wendy James associated the state expansion to this area with an increasing demand for slaves during the reign of Menilek II. See Wendy James, "Notes on the Gumuz: Their Cultures, History and Survival", *A Paper Presented to the Ethiopian Origin Conference held at School of Oriental and African Studies on 28th and 29th June, 1979*, pp. 9-10. Bizualem Birhane stated that the desire for gold was the main factor behind Takla-Haymanot's expedition to the Gumuz country. Bizualem Birhane, "Adal Abba Tanna Nigus of Gojjam and of Kaffa, 1850-1901", BA Thesis, History, Haile Sellassie I University, 1971, p. 47.

Benishangul-Gumuz area.²⁴ It should not be forgotten that after the Battle of Adwa, in 1896, Emperor Menilek II and his generals were preoccupied with the work of creating buffer zones to safeguard the Ethiopian empire from an all-out colonial penetration.

Therefore, as a response to the aforementioned external development, Emperor Menilek II (r. 1889-1913) dispatched an army commanded by his right hand man, *Ras Makonnen*, to the Belashangul region in 1897.²⁵ This army was reinforced by the forces of other regional lords, viz. *Dejjazmach* Kumsa Morada, later Gebre Egziabher of Leqa Neqemte, *Dejjazmach* Jote Tulu of Leqa Qellem and *Dejjazmach* Demissew of Illu Abbabora.²⁶ From the side of the Belashangul chiefs at first there was a spirit of resistance. Hence, the three chiefs of Belashangul Khojele al-Hassen, Mahmoud, and Abd al-Rahman Khojele formed alliance to check Menilek's expansion.²⁷ Nevertheless, *Sheikh* Khojale al-Hassen broke the alliance and made a unilateral peace with *Ras Makonnen*.²⁸ The two chiefs attempted to fight but their resistance was easily broken. Consequently, the Belashangul region south of the Abbay was annexed with a lesser cost in 1897.²⁹

The year 1898 also witnessed the establishment of direct and effective control over the Gumuz polity of Gubba. In this year *Negus* Tekle-Haymanot of Gojjam (r. 1881-1901) marched to the country of the Gumuz commanding 10,000 troops. This lastly broke Gumuz resistance and the entire Gumuz land including Gubba fell under the direct and effective administrative control of the Ethiopian state.³⁰ Tekle-Haymanot's expedition was not different in motive from the one that had been made in Bela-Shangul region. It was European encroachment from the direction of the Sudan that induced Tekle-Haymanot to wage a campaign to the Gumuz area.³¹

²⁴ Bahru, p. 61.

²⁵ Triulzi, p. 176.

²⁶ Atieb Ahmed Dafallah, "Sheikh Khojele Al-Hassan and Bela-Shangul (1825-1938)", BA Thesis, History, Haile Sellassie I University, 1973, p. 38.

²⁷ Desalegn Sisay, "The Process of Incorporation of the Belashangul Region into Ethiopian Empire (1936-1991)", BA Thesis, History, Addis Ababa University, 1997, p. 12.

²⁸ Bahru, p. 66.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

³⁰ Takla Iyasus, "*Ya Ityopya Tarik: Nigus Takla-Haymanot*", Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Ms 254, Addis Ababa University, folio. 105-106; Fo/403/275, Mr. Rodd to the Marquess of Salisbury, 26 August, 1898, p. 85; Bizualem, pp.46-47.

³¹ Abdussamad H. Ahmad, "The Gumuz of the Lowlands of Western Gojjam: The Frontier in History, 1900-1935", *Africa Rivista Trimestrale di Studi e documentazione dell' Istituto Italo-Africano*, Anno L., N.1, Marzo 1995, p.56.

However, it is noteworthy that unlike the Belashangul, this area was not totally independent from the Ethiopian state. As Tadesse Tamrat noted the Gumuz of this area were indirectly ruled and their resources procured through the Agaws of Matakal. After the Agaws had been incorporated into the socio-economic and political framework of the Ethiopian state, in the seventeenth century, they played the role of a middleman between the central state and the Gumuz.³² In short, the Agaws were agents of the central state to the Gumuz. Moreover, Tadesse and other students of Gumuz history discussed a number of sporadic campaigns of medieval kings to the Gumuz country in search of the rich resources of the area.³³ To conclude, the 1898 episode was nothing but it witnessed a much closer administrative incorporation of the Gumuz country to the central state than in earlier days. The process of creating a much more closer and direct administration over the Bela-Shangul and Gumuz country was further strengthened when the Ethio-Sudanese boundary was demarcated and the region fell within the Ethiopian side in 1902.³⁴

From territorial administrative point of view, after the conquest, the task of ruling the Benishangul-Gumuz Islamic polities was, in more broad terms, given to the traditional chiefs. Some members of the traditional ruling class were given new Ethiopian titles like *Dejjazmach* and *Fitawrari* and allowed to exercise much degree of internal political autonomy of power.³⁵ *Sheikh Khojale al Hassen*, who was able to outshine and strengthen his power at the expense of other traditional rulers of Bela-Shangul, was a paramount chief of the area from 1908 until his death in 1938.³⁶ Similarly *Hamdan Abu Shok of Gubba* also maintained the autonomy of his chiefdom until 1938.³⁷ According to *Belaten-geta Mahtam Sillassie Wolde-Mesqel*, Belashangul and Guba were

³²Tadesse Tamrat, "Nile-Sahara Interaction with Neighbouring Highlanders: The Case of the Gumuz of Gojjam and Wallaga", in *Proceedings of the Workshop on Famine Experience and Resettlement in Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa, December 29-30, 1988, Addis Ababa: Institute of Development Research, 1988, pp. 14-16.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 13; Ernest Cerulli, *Peoples of the South-west Ethiopia and its Borderlands, Ethnographic Survey of Africa*, London: International African Institute, 1956, p. 15.

³⁴ James, "Notes...", p. 10.

³⁵ Bahru, p. 68; For example, Menilek provided Abd al-Rhaman Khojale and Mohammad with the title of *Dajjazmach* and *Fitawrari*, respectively. Hamdan of Gubba also became *Dajjazmach* Banja.

³⁶ Detail historical discussion is available in Atieb, pp. 51-64.

³⁷ See Garretson, pp. 197-210. Hamdan was one of the honored guests at Haile Sellassie's coronation ceremony in Addis Ababa in 1930. R.E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, London: Frank Cass, 1968, p. 368.

two of the six autonomous areas of the Ethiopian Empire in the first half of the twentieth century.³⁸

Although the literature on the Beni-Shangul- Gumuz region in the Italian occupation period, 1935-41, is not very extensive nor is it satisfactory, available ones reveals that the Italians changed the administrative structure of the area. The Italians made the autonomous Bela-Shangul a commissariat under the regional division of “Oromo and Sidama”³⁹ Thus, its special administrative status and hierarchical chain with the center was interrupted. No substantive evidence indicates the administrative status of Gubba during the Italian period. It should be noted that the fact that that period witnessed considerable military bustle in the area. The Italians had strong military camp in Gubba to defend possible British attack from the Sudan and to suppress local patriotic resistance.⁴⁰ Members of the ruling classes of Gubba were active participants of the resistance period.⁴¹ From this situation it seems safe to assume that at that time the Gumuz polity of Gubba did not enjoy its autonomous privilege like Bela-Shangul.

In the post-liberation period the administrative modification that had been started during the Italian occupation period was further strengthened. In 1942, the Assosa-Beni-Shangul *Awraja* was set up under the Wellega Governorate General. The first governor of the Assosa-Beni-Shangul *Awraja* was *Qannazmach* Kidane Mariam, of north Shewan origin.⁴² But the three *Woredas* of the new *Awraja* were governed by the descendants of *Sheikh* Khojale al-Hassan and *Dejjazmach* Abd al-Rahman.⁴³ Similarly, Gubba was administered as outlying district of the Governorate General of Begemidir up until 1956.⁴⁴ In 1956, when the vast Agaw-Bahir Dar *Awraja* was disintegrated and the status of Matakka was upgraded to an *Awraja* administrative unit, Gubba became a *worada* of Matakka *Awraja*.⁴⁵ But the

³⁸Mahtama-Sillassie Wolde-Masqel, *Zikra Nagar*, (reprinted), Addis Ababa, 1962 E.C., p. 164.

³⁹ Desalegn, p. 21.

⁴⁰ Seletene Seyoum, “A History of Resistance in Gojjam (Ethiopia): 1936-41”, PhD Dissertation, History, Addis Ababa University, 1999, p. 346.

⁴¹Seletene listed the sons of *Dajjazmach* Banja or Hamdan; Muhamad and Osman Banja among the prominent patriotic leaders of the resistance period. Seletene, p. 181.

⁴² Desalegn, p. 26.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴⁴Bazezew Gelaw, “A History of Chagni Town to 1974”, BA Thesis, History, Addis Ababa University, 1994, p. 24.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

worada continued to be ruled by the sons of Hamdan Abu Shok.⁴⁶ In more broad terms, the post-1941 developments clearly indicate that the indigenous chiefs' power was gradually eroded. On the other hand, the presence of the central government in the region became stronger than ever before.

The process of centralization of the Bela-Shangul and Gubba peripheral regions culminated after the 1974 Revolution. Particularly, the resettlement programmes that were carried on in the Beni-Shangul area and Pawe, in Gumuz country, in the late 1970s and 1980s further accelerated the integration of the region with the center. Tens of thousands of highland peasants from drought-affected different parts of Ethiopia settled in Asossa and Pawe areas. The 1980s also witnessed strong presence of the central government in Asossa and Guba areas because they were among the areas where anti-government forces attacked the Military Government (*Derg*) until 1991.⁴⁷

To conclude, as we have tried to analyze, although the Barta and the Gumuz have many cultural and physical similarities and speak a Nilo-Saharan language family, the two ethnic groups passed through a variety of administrative arrangements. The Barta dominated the Bela-Shangul chiefdoms in the region south of the Abbay. The Gumuz were ruled either under the Gubba polity or under their tribal political organization where elders were the highest authority. In short, the two dominant ethnic groups, the Barta and the Gumuz, never had common administrative experience until the Bela-Shangul and the Gumuz country were merged to form "Region Six" after the 1991 change of government in Ethiopia.

Region Six: Establishment and Politics under the Transitional Government, 1991-95

May 1991 witnessed not only a metamorphosis of government but also a new perspective and administrative reshuffling in Ethiopia. The new government, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (hereafter EPRDF), gave the green light for the establishment of a federal structure and a redivision of the country mainly on ethnic basis soon after it had seized political power. Subsequently, the newly established Transitional Government's Charter was issued to provide a legislative base for the establishment of national regional states in Ethiopian in July 1991.⁴⁸ This was

⁴⁶ Abdussamad described *Fitawrari* Algamar Hamdan Abu Shok as governor of Gubba *Woreda* until 1991. Abdussamad, "Trading in Slaves...", p. 433.

⁴⁷ Wendy James, "No Place to Hide Flag Waving on the Western Frontier", James et al (eds.), *Remapping Ethiopia Socialism & After*, Oxford: James Curry, 2002, p. 263.

⁴⁸ *Negarit Gazeta*, No. 1, 22nd July 1991; *Informants*: "Mr. Y"; "Mr. N"; "Mr. R"; "Mr. S".

the first policy statement that symbolizes the establishment of ethnic federalism in the country. Article II of the Transitional Government's Charter, which declares the right of the nations to "self-determination", enumerates various rights that were guaranteed to nations and nationalities of the country. As per section "b" of this Article, every nation or nationality or people were endowed with the right to: "Administer its own affairs within its own defined territory and effectively participate in the central government on the basis of freedom, and fair and proper representation."⁴⁹

Secondly, on 14 January 1992, the Transitional Government promulgated a decree entitled "A Proclamation to Provide for the Establishment of National Regional Self-Governments" under Proclamation No. 7/1992.⁵⁰ This was the second legal instrument that reaffirmed and further strengthened the Charter. Its legal provision for the establishment of ethnic federalism read as follows: "Whereas the right of nations, nationalities and peoples to self-determination and to determine their own affairs by themselves has been affirmed by the above mentioned Charter."⁵¹ No. 3 of the January proclamation listed the names of the newly established national regional states with their ethnic composition. Hence, it precisely documented the establishment of "Region Six" as a regional national state of the Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Northern Mao and Koma peoples.⁵² Accordingly, the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State was established at the beginning of the 1990s by merging parts of the former Assosa and *Mātākāl* administrative regions. Subsequently, the work of setting up tentative administrative structure in Region Six at the *Woreda* and *Kebelle* levels was officially started in February 1992.⁵³ However, it is noteworthy that other legal instruments that reinforced the establishment of national regional states continued to be promulgated. Chief among them was the 1994 constitution that divided the country into nine regional states and two chartered cities, Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa.⁵⁴

In February 1992, six political parties were said to have participated in the process of electing *Woreda* and *Kebelle* council committee members in Region Six. These were: EPRDF, Agaw Democratic Movement (ADM), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Gumuz Beni-Shangul Peoples Liberation Movement (GBPLM), Baro-Shinasha Peoples Democratic Movement

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Negarit Gazeta*, No. 2, 14th January 1992.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Addis Zaman*, Year 50, No. 246, *Yekatit* 15, 1984 E.C.; *Informants*: "Mr. Y"; "Mr. R"; "Mr. N".

⁵⁴ *Ya Ityopya Higa-Mangist Reqiqi*, Addis Ababa, *Miyazy* 25, 1986, p. 21.

(BSPDM), and Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU).⁵⁵ Although the last political party's representative was not known, others were delegated as follows: EPRDF-Kahsay Zeraybruk, ADM-Abduslam Yidag, OLF- Hundama Kaba, GBPLM- Abud Muhammad Nur and BSPDM- Damtew Gobena.⁵⁶ However, the actual election for *Woreda* and *Kebelle* Council members suspended for three months due to unspecified reasons.

In May 1992, the first election for *Woreda* and *Kebelle* Council Committee members was fully conducted in Gubba, Asossa, Kumuruk and Gizen *Woredas* only.⁵⁷ In Gubba and Asossa, there were problems that hindered the electoral process. Ato Damtew Gobena, Chairman of the Region Six electoral committee, disclosed that the Gubba election was conducted after a consensus had been reached with the Gumuz People's Liberation Movement that was creating problems on the on-going election.⁵⁸ As it was revealed later, in Asossa election for *Woreda* Council members was not completed until July 1992.⁵⁹ However, in the rest of eleven *Woredas* of Region Six, the National Electoral Board decided the election to be carried out for *Kabelle* council members only. The Board was said to have reached to the decision due to complaints from some political parties which were not mentioned in name.⁶⁰ The election for *Kabelle* council members conducted in Matakal, Asossa, and Matama administrative zones except in some *woredas* viz. Begi, Afela, Mansibu and Gidame, where the existing security problem became insurmountable obstacle.⁶¹ All the political parties that had been mentioned in February 1992 were said to have participated in the electoral process except the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU).⁶²

In June 1992, the first election for seats of the House of People's Representatives and the Regional Council was held throughout the country, including Region Six, on the basis of proclamation No. 11/1984.⁶³ However, this election was not conducted in Region Six without problems. For example, the result of the election of the Asossa area was concealed by the National Electoral Board on the ground that it had been carried out outside the

⁵⁵ *Addis Zaman*, Year 50, No. 246, *Yekatit* 15, 1984 E.C.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Addis Zaman*, Year 50, No. 309, *Ginbot* 6, 1984 E.C.; *Informants*: "Mr. Y"; "Mr. W"; "Mr. N".

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Addis Zaman*, Year 50, No. 359, *Hamle* 6, 1984 E.C.

⁶⁰ *Addis Zaman*, Year 50, No. 309, *Ginbot* 6, 1984 E.C.

⁶¹ *Ibid. Informants*: "Mr. Y"; "Mr. X"; "Mr. M".

⁶² *Addis Zaman*, Year 50, No. 309, *Ginbot* 6, 1984 E.C.

⁶³ "Ya Ityopya Shigigir Mangist Mircha Komishin Ya-Kilil Betoch Misreta Gubae Kinwane", *Nehase* 11-17, 1984 E.C., Addis Ababa, p. 1.

guideline of the Board. Hence, in Asossa re-election was held in December 1992.⁶⁴ Apparently, as it will become evident later, democratic election in Region Six was adversely affected by absence of peace and stability in the area.

During the Transitional Government period, the political reality of Region Six witnessed intense ethnic conflict and rivalry among political organizations for power. These led to volatile political situation in the region. To resolve these major hindrances of peace and stability a number of reconciliation conferences were conducted but none seems to have succeeded in achieving long lasting solution. One of the earliest attempts was a three days peace conference summoned by the Beni-Shangul Liberation Movement (BLN) in Asossa town in May 1992.⁶⁵ The main objective of the conference was to elect leaders as a remedy for the existing problems of power-mongering within this predominant political organization of the region. Subsequently, the conference elected *Ato* Kadir Ahmad to be chairman, *Ato* Atom Ahmad and *Ato* Defar Zargu to be vice chairman and commander-in-chief of the army of the Beni-Shangul Liberation Movement,⁶⁶ respectively. At that same conference, *Ato* Atieb Ahmed, a grandson of *Shekhi* Khojale al-Hassen, and Dr. Mekonnen Golessa were elected to represent the region in the House of Federation.⁶⁷ The conference seemed to have created relative peace and stability, albeit temporary, in Asossa and its surroundings.

Manifestly, the Ethiopian Air Lines resumed its domestic flight to Asossa town.⁶⁸ Moreover, political leaders tried to rehabilitate victims of the pervasive political disturbance of the region. It is noteworthy that the food crisis was becoming more acute in 1992. The peoples of Region Six were not able to harvest because of political disturbance that had been occurred in the seeding season of the previous year, 1991. As a result, thousands were suffering hunger. Hence, Dr. Mekonnen Gulessa, Chairman of the Gumuz People Liberation Movement requested the Government and other humanitarian non-government organization for assistance.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, from some reports, it is possible to comprehend that a stable political situation was not created in the region up until August 1992. In July

⁶⁴ *Addis Zaman*, Year 50, No. 442, *Tahisas*17, 1985 E.C.; *Informant*: “Mr. Y”.

⁶⁵ *Addis Zaman*, Year 50, No. 314, *Ginbot* 12, 1984 E.C.

⁶⁶ *Ibid. Informants*: “Mr. W”; “Mr. T”; “Mr. Z”.

⁶⁷ *Addis Zaman*, Year 50, No. 314, *Ginbot* 12, 1984 E.C.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

1992, evidence shows absence of working condition that enabled civil servants to resume work in the region. The major factor behind the problem was absence of peace and order in the area. As a result, many of the civil servants of the region left the area for other parts of the country. Those who decided to remain in Asossa became idle. Civil servants of the various offices such as Bank, Telecommunication, Postal Office and others did not provide service to the people of the area.⁷⁰ Overland transportation from the center to Asossa was also interrupted due to the existing security problem until August 1992.⁷¹ This resulted a skyrocketing in price of commodities in Asossa and other towns of Region Six.⁷² It is important to mention that the Neqemete-Asossa highway was a battle ground between the defense force and anti-government forces until August 1992. Ato Haylom Araya, commander-in-chief of the Southwest Defense Command, disclosed the liberation of the highway from anti-government forces in August 1992. Moreover, he promised close follow up to maintain the security of the road that connected Asossa with the center.⁷³ In short, this added to the security risks of Region Six in 1992.

In the period between 1992 and 1994, the Northern part of Region Six, Matakal Zone, also witnessed simmering ethnic conflict between the Gumuz and other ethnic groups and settlers of the Pawe area. It is said that wrong political agitation nourished the seed of conflict already planted within the ethnic groups of the Matakal area. The inter-ethnic conflict in Matakal area was launched when the Gumuz conducted an offensive attack against the settlers starting from January 30, 1992.⁷⁴ Consequently, many of the settlers' villages called Bagos-bar, Dach, Dawur, Dawur-bar, Yacharaqa, Tadasach-Ethiopia, Goncha, Ama Amba were burnt. The Gumuz also destroyed and looted the crops and properties of the settlers of Dabra-Zayt, Nach Dengay, Addis Zaman, and Addis Alam. On the other hand, the settlers organized themselves and soon transformed their action from defense to counter attack against Gumuz settlement areas.⁷⁵

In the meantime, various factions of ethnic political parties of Region Six attempted to resolve the prevailing political and security problems of the region through discussion. Thus, a conference was held in Chagni town,

⁷⁰ *Addis Zaman*, Year 50, No. 361, *Hamle* 12, 1984 E.C.

⁷¹ *Ibid*; *Informants*: "Mr. Y"; "Mr. T"; "Mr. S".

⁷² *Informants*: "Mr. Y"; "Mr. T"; "Mr. S".

⁷³ *Addis Zaman*, Year 50, No. 382, *Nehase* 6, 1984 E.C.

⁷⁴ Berihanu Mebrate, "Spontaneous Settlement and Inter-Ethnic Relations in Matakal, Northwest Ethiopia", MA Thesis, Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University, 1996, p. 114.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*.

historically the administrative seat of *Mātākkāl*, in the end of July 1992.⁷⁶ It was conducted under the auspice of the Beni-Shangul Peoples Liberation Movement, which later became responsible for the ongoing tragedy. The participants were mainly the representatives of the Baro Shinasha People's Democratic Movement, the Gumuz People's Liberation Movement, the Transitional Government and the Northern Defense Command. To give community or grassroots base for the conference, elders and representative of the various ethnic groups were also said to have participated.⁷⁷ At the end of the conference, it was reported that the discussion was a fruitful one to avoid problems that led to further inter-ethnic conflict in the region. Moreover, representatives from the five indigenous ethnic groups of the Region Six, *vis.* Barta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Komo and Mao reached a consensus to dry up all sources of conflict among the political organizations of the region and to create a formidable alliance against anti-peace forces. The delegates also agreed to set up a committee that would facilitate the foundation of a single common political party.⁷⁸ However, as it will become evident later the conference failed to address to the simmering ethnic tensions in the vast region, which is the homeland of the various and diverse small ethnic groups.

In August 1992, a team of elders drawn from the peoples of the Matakal area was dispatched to Addis Ababa to appeal to the Transitional Government for intervention in the conflict.⁷⁹ The team also organized a peaceful demonstration in Addis Ababa and expressed the grievances of the settlers and other peoples of the area.⁸⁰ In that same month, in August 1992, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council on its Third Report enunciated the effects of the inter-ethnic conflict of the area as follows:

In Metekkil awraja, DibaTena, Mandura, Gungua wredas the representative of the displaced Amharic speaking Moslems have brought allegation that the Beni Shangul burnt alive many persons and castrated many men, shot and killed about 270 persons, burnt 185 mosques and 6,833 houses and the people were forcefully displaced, looted or burnt crops on farms and grains in stores as well as livestock. As a consequence of all this some 60,000 persons are displaced and are

⁷⁶ *Addis Zaman*, Year 50, No. 370, *Hamle* 22, 1984 E.C.; *Informants*: “Mr. Y”; “Mr. W”; “Mr. R”.

⁷⁷ *Addis Zaman*, Year 50, No. 370, *Hamle* 22, 1984 E.C.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Berihun, p. 115.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

now under temporary open camps at Manta Wuha and Chagni towns without any shelter, clothing and medical facilities.⁸¹

However, the Transitional Government did not give due attention to the ethnic conflict in the Matakal area. Consequently, it failed to make major peace building intervention with administrative and military actions; despite the fact that the existing political instability in the area needed closer attention and further examination to understand the real cause of the inter-ethnic conflict.

In September 1993, the ethnic conflict of the Matakal zone attained its highest point. In that same month, the peoples belonged to the Amhara, Agaw, and Kambata and other ethnic groups of the area reacted with a strong demonstration in Pawe town.⁸² The demonstration appealed to the Transitional Government for some immediate and basic demands. Regarding the first, they demanded for the dismissal of the Transitional Government representative of Dangur *awraja*, Ato Asafa Aynabo, from power. Their basic demand was to be administered under the National State of Region Three. The rationale of the demonstrators for their basic demand was close resemblance in language, culture, custom and tradition with the peoples of Region Three. Moreover, the demonstrators requested for the resumption of public transportation and the Tana-Balas project that were interrupted after the change of government. They also asked a long lasting solution for the increasing security problem of the area due to worst inter-ethnic relation between the Gumuz and the other ethnic groups of the Matakal area.⁸³ Nevertheless, the Transitional Government remained deaf to all the questions of the demonstrators and did not take immediate peace building intervention in the prevailing ethnic conflict of the region.

In the meantime, the army of the Gumuz-Beni-Shangul People's Liberation Movement massacred peoples belonged to the Agaw, Amhara, Kambata and other ethnic groups at the Pawe open market on September 18, 1993.⁸⁴ The episode precipitated a series of acute political crisis in Pawe. Within few days, the peoples of the area organized themselves and started to arrest the Gumuz and Shinasha officials of the Matakal Zone. Some of the officials escaped and hide themselves in the camp of the army of the Gumuz-Beni-Shangul Liberation Movement, which was found in Pawe. When the peoples of the

⁸¹*Ethiopian Review*, Vol. 2, No. 8, August, 1992; *Informants*: "Mr. Y"; "Mr. W"; "Mr. X"; "Mr. T".

⁸²*Addis Zaman*, Year 50, No. 407, *Maskerem* 3, 1985 E.C.

⁸³*Ibid.*; *Informants*: "Mr. Y"; "Mr. W"; "Mr. X"; "Mr. T".

⁸⁴*Tomar*, Vol. 1, No. 12, *Tiqimt* 5, 1986.

area (re-settlers and others) began to take measures including death penalty against arrested Gumuz and Shinasha officials without waiting order from the central government, the army of EPRDF began to intervene. Both the peoples of Pawe and the army of EPRDF encircled the aforementioned camp and asked the army of the Gumuz-Beni-Shangul Liberation Movement to surrender. This led to a fierce battle that costs the lives of 50 Gumuz-Beni-Shangul militias.⁸⁵ The re-settlers and other peoples constituted from different ethnic groups also led devastating campaigns against the nearby Gumuz villages as a revenge for the earlier incident.⁸⁶

The Pawe conflict was widely criticized by some political parties and private papers. To mention, the Agaw People's Democratic Movement (APDM) issued a manifesto that condemned the Pawe market massacre in October 1993.⁸⁷ The APDM reminded about the inter-ethnic conflict in Pawe area since the change of government in 1991. It also indicated the adverse effects of the conflict on loss of human lives, destruction of properties and massive displacement of peoples. Although both elders of the area and APDM frequently appealed to the House of People's Representatives for peaceful solution, the Transitional Government did not give due attention to the crisis.⁸⁸ According to APDM, the major factors that aggravated the ethnic conflict in the area were: First, the June 1992 election that discriminated the settlers and other ethnic groups of the region as "alien" and precluded them from campaigning for both seats of the House of People's Representatives and the Regional Council. Second, the decision that made Pawe town the capital of Region Six was against the demand of dwellers of the town who were requesting to be administered under the National State of Region Three of the Amhara.⁸⁹

In October 1993, the Transitional Government also began to give more attention to the volatile situation of the Matakal area. Subsequently, the Transitional Government sent a team to the area to examine the problem and suggest possible solution.⁹⁰ Finally, on the basis of the reports of the team, the areas predominantly settled by Amhara and Agaw ethnic groups were decided to be administered under Region Three. The government also provided Pawe with special administrative status known as special *woreda*. Subsequently, its

⁸⁵Berihun, p. 123; *Informants*: "Mr. Y"; "Mr. W"; "Mr. X"; "Mr. T".

⁸⁶*Ibid.*

⁸⁷*Tomar*, Vol. 1, No. 12, *Tiqimt5*, 1986.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*

⁸⁹*Ibid.*

⁹⁰Berihun, p. 116.

administrative hierarchical chain began to be linked directly with the Regional Council of the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional state.⁹¹

During the first decade of its establishment, the Benishangul-Gumuz region remained politically fragile due to the lack of a well-developed inter-ethnic relationship mainly among the indigenous peoples of the region. In this respect, the Gumuz in the northern part of the region (the Matakal zone) had stronger economic relations with the Agaws of the Amhara region than the peoples of the southern part of the region (Kamashi and Assosa zones). Similarly, the southern and western parts of the region (Kamashi and Assosa zones) had stronger economic relations with the Oromia region than the northern part of the region (the Matakal zone). Therefore, particularly the transitional period witnessed a simmering ethnic conflict among the indigenous peoples of Region Six. The conflict between the Gumuz and the Barta that would occupy the central stage of the politics of Region Six was aggravated during that period. Apparently, the Barta-Gumuz conflict was an extension of intense rivalry among the emerging elites who found the ethnic weapon most expedient in the competition for political power. In the beginning of 1993, the conflict resulted in a serious disturbance in Asossa Zone that resulted in much causality, including 85 deaths. It also induced massive displacement of the Barta ethnic groups from their original settlement areas.⁹² In February 1993, representatives of the two ethnic groups exchanged views to resolve the problem peacefully in Asossa town. It was reported that the conflict was settled and the displaced Bartas were returned to their villages.⁹³ It is noteworthy that the conflict between the Barta and the Gumuz frequently reported that it was resolved through conferences and other ways of understanding. Nevertheless, Barta-Gumuz conflict remained for long as the *Achilles heel* of the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State.

As a result of problems pertinent to political instability and insecurity, the establishment of Region Six was much delayed than the other national states of the country. As it has been tried to be analyzed, inter-ethnic conflicts, and inter and intra-party rivalry for power created volatile situation in the region. Moreover, the military activity of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was also the other factor that added to the security risks of the area.⁹⁴ Indeed, as John Young noted during the beginning of the 1990s, the OLF was promoting the idea of “Black Oromo” identity in the hope of bringing ethnic groups, who

⁹¹*Ibid*; Informants: “Mr. Y”; “Mr. W”; “Mr. X”; “Mr. T”.

⁹²*Addis Zaman*, Year 52, No. 423, *Hidar* 22, 1985 E.C.

⁹³*Ibid*.

⁹⁴*Addis Zaman*, Year 56, No. 344, *Sane* 2, 1988 E.C.

belong to the Nilo-Saharan linguistic group, who have lived in the Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz regions into “independent Oromia”.⁹⁵ Therefore, the establishment of the Region Six National State was not practically completed up until May 28, 1993.⁹⁶

The region’s administrative territory was not clearly known and demarcated until the end of 1995.⁹⁷ Some areas, which had been administered under Region Six, were given to the neighboring national states. For example, Qwara and Matama were once part of the Region Six but later they went to Region Three.⁹⁸ Despite the fact that there were no major outstanding boundary issues in the relationships between the Amhara and the Benishangul-Gumuz regional states, the boundaries of the two states were not so far clearly marked. The first constitution of the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State indicated that the region was border in the north with the Tigray National Regional State.⁹⁹ This meant that the political map of the Benishangul-Gumuz region was supposed to include the entire western territory of the Amhara National Regional State bordering with the Sudan. However, the Benishangul-Gumuz regional government, later on, made a boundary revision and stopped claim over Qwara and Metema *woredas* as a result of a reported deal with the government of the Amhara National Regional State. Therefore, the 2002-Revised Constitution of the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State declared that the region is bordered in the north with the Amhara regional state, but not with Tigray.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, the question of Begi *woreda*, which connected Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella regions, was also controversial between the national states of Region Six and Region Four until July 1995. At first, the Benishangul-Gumuz region was declared to have a boundary with the Gambella region in the south. On the other hand, the Oromia National Regional State put strong claim over Begi. Finally, the Prime Minister’s office decided the issue to be settled through referendum. The referendum was conducted in the beginning of July 1995 and accordingly Begi transferred to Oromia.¹⁰¹ However, the 2002-Revised Constitution of the Benishangul-

⁹⁵ John Young, “Along Ethiopia’s Western Frontier: Gambella and Benishangul in Transition”, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 37, 2 (1999), 321-346, Cambridge University Press, p., 326-8.

⁹⁶ *Addis Zaman*, Year 56, No. 344, *Sane* 2, 1988 E.C.

⁹⁷ *Addis Zaman*, Year 55, No. 93, *Nehase* 11, 1987 E.C.; *Informants*: “Mr. Y”; “Mr. T”.

⁹⁸ *Addis Zaman*, Year 55, No. 55, *Sane* 27, 1987 E.C.

⁹⁹ “*Ya Benishangul-Gumuz Biherawi Kililawi Mangist Higa-Mangist*”, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ *Revised Constitution of the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State*, Assosa, Hidar 1995 E.C., p.2.

¹⁰¹ *Addis Zaman*, Year 55, No. 48, *Sane* 18, 1987 E.C.; “La Ityopya Federalawi Demokrasiyawi Republic Mengist Ya Hizb Tewokayoch Mikir Bet Kaltyopya Biherawi Mirch

Gumuz National Regional State still continued to claim that the region shares a boundary with the Gambella National Regional State in the south.¹⁰²

Little is known as to the number and names of political organization that were active in the Region Six during the Transitional period. But some sources trace only the names of major political organizations as follows: the Gumuz People's Liberation Movement (GPLM), the Baro-Shinasha People's Democratic Movement (BSPDM), the Mao and Komo People's Democratic Movement (MKPDM), the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM), and the Benishangul North West Ethiopia People's Democratic United Party (BNWEPDUP).¹⁰³ None of them were members of EPRDF, but most of them came into existence under the EPRDF regime. It is apparent that the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM) was the predominant political organization in the Region Six during the Transitional period. It had been founded before the change of government and had its own army recruited from the Barta and the Gumuz ethnic groups.

Similarly, we have very limited knowledge about the chief executives of the state during the Transitional period. Apparently, many people were empowered and dismissed from power. One source, which I have been able to consult from the Ethiopian National Electoral Board, reveals that *Ato* Atyib Ahmed, Dr. Mekonnen Gulessa and *Ato* Taye Bayable were president, vice president and secretary of Region Six during the Transitional period, respectively.¹⁰⁴ But, there were others who were chief executives of Region Six although we couldn't get their names.

The nationwide election that was conducted in the end of the Transitional period was not without problem in Region Six. The election for members of the House of People's Representatives in Asossa and Matakal zones was held before the election date on April 25, 1987 E.C. (May 3, 1995).¹⁰⁵ It was said that this was wittingly done to marginalize representatives of the Shinasha ethnic group. Hence, after the Shinasha had appealed to the Ethiopian National Electoral Board, the result was canceled on the ground that the election was not conducted in line with the rules and regulations of the Board.¹⁰⁶ In May

Bord Beteleyayu Gizyat Yetekihiyadu Mirchawochin Asmelikito Yeqerebe Ateqalay Riport” *Meskerem*, 1989 E.C., p. 50; *Informants*: “Mr. Y”; “Mr. N”; “Mr. W”; “Mr. M”; “Mr. T”.

¹⁰² *Revised Constitution of the Benishangul-Gumuz ...*, p.2.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁰⁴ “Ya-Kililoch Mastadadar Mikir Betoeh Liqa Manbarochina Miktil Liqamanbarina Tsahafiwoch”, (no date), p. 1.

¹⁰⁵ “*La Ityopya Federalawi...*”, p. 12; *Informants*: “Mr. Y”; “Mr. W”; “Mr. T”.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

1995, the Beni-Shangul North West Ethiopia Peoples Democratic United Party (BNWEPDUP) won the majority seats for both Regional Council and the House of People's Representatives in the election campaign competing mainly with the Beni-Shangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM),¹⁰⁷ the predominant party of the region during the Transitional period. The BNWEPDUP was founded in 1994 as a coalition party of Gumuz People's Liberation Movement, Baro-Shinasha People's Democratic Movement, Beni-Shangul West Ethiopia People's Democratic United Party, and the Mao and Komo People's Democratic Organization.¹⁰⁸ The Beni-Shangul People's Liberation Movement, which was mainly the party of the Barta ethnic group, did not accept the result of the election rather it complained that the election was not righteous. But the Ethiopian National Electoral Board rejected the appeal of the BPLM.¹⁰⁹ To conclude, the May 1995 election result shows a clear and dramatic shift from Barta to Gumuz-Shinasha domination in the power balance of Region Six.

The Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State, 1995-2001

After the May 1995 election, the process of establishing the regional government that would rule the state for the next five years was soon started. Subsequently, the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State founding conference was held from June 27 to July 6, 1995.¹¹⁰ The founding conference passed some important resolutions until its termination on 6 July 1995 due to sharp disagreement among the participants as to the nomination of the three higher officials of the regional state, the president, the vice president and the secretary.¹¹¹ Chief among them: the conference after discussing on various suggested names to the national state; it chose "Benishangul-Gumuz National Region" to supersede the previous Region Six.¹¹² It also decided Amharic to be the official language of the national state.¹¹³ Moreover, the conference reached an agreement that the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State to have its own flag and anthem.¹¹⁴ At the same conference, three men were elected to represent the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State in the House of Federation. Ethnically, they were constituted from the Barta, Gumuz

¹⁰⁷ *Abiyotawi Demokrasi*, Year 6, No. 117, *Ginbot* 1987 E.C.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Addis Zaman*, Year 55, No. 58, *Sane* 30, 1987 E.C.; *Addis Zaman*, Year 55, No. 77, *Hamle* 21, 1987 E.C.; *Informants*: "Mr. Y"; "Mr. N"; "Mr. W"; "Mr. M"; "Mr. T".

¹¹¹ *Addis Zaman*, Year 55, No. 58, *Sane* 30, 1987 E.C.

¹¹² *Addis Zaman*, Year 55, No. 52, *Sane* 23, 1987 E.C.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

and Shinasha peoples. Two of them were not members of the Regional Council. It was said that one of them was the previous president of Region Six, *Ato* Abdu Muhammad Ali, who was not successful in the 1995 election campaign for the seat of the Regional Council.¹¹⁵

The founding conference also passed resolutions on other major points at issue. However, the participants of the conference could not reach an agreement on the procedure that should be pursued to elect the president, vice president and the secretary of the regional state. The matter divided the participants into two groups. The first group argued that the three higher officials of the state had to be elected from chief executives directly by the general participants of the conference.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, the second group insisted that the three higher officials had to be elected by members of the chief executives of the region whom would be elected by the general assembly.¹¹⁷ As per Article 55 of the Region's Constitution, the president would be elected from the executive members by the general assembly of the Regional Council.¹¹⁸ But representatives of the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement refused to accept the statement of the article on the ground that the article contradicted with the aims and principles of their organization.¹¹⁹ Hence, after long wrangling, the participants terminated the conference passing the following decisions: First, they allowed the previous members of the region's chief executive to continue their leadership role over the region. Second, the participants were said to have rendered the responsibility of nominating the three higher officials of the region to the Federal Government. Third, they were said to have vested the responsibility of maintaining the peace and security of the region to the Transitional Government Defense Force.¹²⁰

On July 30, 1995, the interrupted founding conference of the Benishangul Gumuz Region was resumed.¹²¹ The Regional Council General Assembly decided and elected nineteen chief executives of the national state. The representation was also decided to be on the basis of the population size of the indigenous ethnic groups of the region. Subsequently, the Barta were represented by six, the Gumuz by six, the Shinasha by two and the Mao and

¹¹⁵ *Addis Zaman*, Year 55, No. 57, *Sane* 29, 1987 E.C.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Addis Zaman*, Year 55, No. 55, *Sane* 27, 1987 E.C.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Berihun, p. 116; *Informants*: "Mr. Y"; "Mr. N"; "Mr. W"; "Mr. T". . .

Komo peoples by five members.¹²² In the resumed conference, the president, the vice president and the secretary of the Benishangul Gumuz National Regional state were elected from members of the chief executive by the general assembly. Consequently, *Ato* Yaregal Ayisheshim, from the Gumuz ethnic group, became president, *Ato* Jafar Zaruq and *Ato* Mustofa Mula became vice president and secretary of the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State,¹²³ respectively.

This conference was first attended by 52 members of the Regional Council. However, eventually 5 representatives of the Benishagul People's Liberation Movement walked out of the conference. The BPLM members complained that they were not fairly represented in the newly elected chief executives of the national state. Moreover, they also complained that the party that held the majority seats, the Benishangul North West Ethiopia People's Democratic United Party, pursued unfair and undemocratic procedure in the process of setting up the regional government.¹²⁴ However, the conference continued to pass decision on other matters.

Thus, the conference decided each of the three administrative zones of the national state to have seven chief executive members.¹²⁵ It also approved 199.9 million *Birr* budget for that fiscal year.¹²⁶ Perhaps the most important decision of the conference was that it approved the first written constitution of the region. The region's constitution that has 12 chapters and 99 articles was approved by the conference with slight modification.¹²⁷ It was reported that Article 34, which elaborated the right of non-native peoples of the region raised controversy among the participants of the conference. The article was first read as follows: "Any Ethiopian who knows the working language of the region has a right to work in any of the region's public and governmental offices through election or appointment." Finally, the article was approved, after the majority of the participants had agreed to replace "election" with the term "employment".¹²⁸ The founding conference of the regional council also raised the question of Pawe. Finally, the participants of the conference reached at a consensus and empowered the region's chief executive to destine the fate

¹²² *Addis Zaman*, Year 55, No. 77, *Hamle* 21, 1987 E.C.

¹²³ *Ibid.*; *Informants*: "Mr. Y"; "Mr. R"; "Mr. W"; "Mr. M"; "Mr. T".

¹²⁴ "*Ya Benishangul-Gumuz Biherawi Kililawi Mengist Higa-Mengist*", Asossa, *Sane* 4, 1984 E.C., p. 16.

¹²⁵ *Addis Zaman*, Year 55, No. 58, *Sane* 30, 1987 E.C.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Addis Zaman*, Year 55, No. 77, *Hamle* 21, 1987 E.C.

¹²⁸ *Addis Zaman*, Year 55, No. 57, *Sane* 29, 1987 E.C.

of Pawe.¹²⁹ The region's chief executive reaffirmed Pawe's privilege as a special *woreda* that its administrative hierarchy to be directly answerable to the Regional Council.¹³⁰

Popular reaction to the newly established Gumuz-Shinasha dominated regional government was quite dramatic. It is apparent that the displacement of the Barta dominated party from the region's state power generated hostility in Asossa area. Subsequently, a huge demonstration was conducted in Asossa town in September 1995.¹³¹ It was said that the demonstration was organized by those who opposed EPRDF and the newly established national regional government.¹³² Because, although the region was endowed with full power to legislate on regional affairs and complete control over its own finances, without interference from another region or from the center, it was said that EPRDF officials were playing the role of an invisible hand in formulating the region's policies and empowering the Gumuz-Shinasha dominated party.¹³³ The demonstrators were said to have asked the reorganization of the Benishangul army which had been demobilized by EPRDF. They also requested for peaceful return of ex-soldiers of the BPLM who had gone to the bush after the army had been demobilized by the government. However, the demonstration was said to have been reacted with ruthless suppression. As a result, many of the demonstrators were reportedly killed, wounded and arrested by government forces.¹³⁴ Moreover, seven high ranking officials of the Benishangul Gumuz National Regional State were said to have fled and took refuge in the Sudan in February 1996. Among them was *Ato* Jafar Razaq, who was vice president of the newly established Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State.¹³⁵

The newly established government of the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State began to take practical measures to improve the political and administrative situation of the region. It summoned the "First Peace,

¹²⁹ *Addis Zaman*, Year 55, No. 77, *Hamle* 21, 1987 E.C.; *Informants*: "Mr. Y"; "Mr. N"; "Mr. W"; "Mr. R"; "Mr. T".

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Itop*, Year 2, No. 039, *Meskerem* 30, 1988 E.C.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.* I also remember that after a split within the TPLF had occurred, the president of the regional state, *Ato* Yaregal, never disguised EPRDF's intervention in the region's affairs in one of the programs of the Ethiopian Television broadcasted in April or May 1993 E.C. He said formal power was vested in the regional government while real power was in the hand of members of EPRDF who were sent from Addis Ababa to provide advisory service.

¹³⁴ *Itop*, Year 2, No. 039, *Meskerem* 30, 1988 E.C.

¹³⁵ *Tomar*, Year 3, No. 28, *Yekatit* 7, 1988 E.C.

Democracy and Development Conference” as a remedy for the deteriorating political and economic situation of the region. Indeed, the conference had tremendous impact on the later political development of the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State. The conference was held in Asossa town from June 9 to 13, 1996.¹³⁶ The participants were mainly representatives of the five ethnic groups and other peoples of the region, and representatives from other national regional states of the country, *viz.* Gambella, Amhara, Harari, Addis Ababa, Afar, Tigray and Somali were participated.¹³⁷ The conference was opened by *Ato* Tamirat Layne, then Prime Minister of the Ethiopian Federal Democratic Republic. In his opening speech, Tamirat said that the conference had to suggest a long lasting solution for the existing problem of political instability in the region. He candidly criticized that the five ethnic based political organizations of the region had neither mass nor democratic base in their organization. Hence, these political organizations were working against the region’s peace and stability rather than creating convenient political situation for the overall development of the region.¹³⁸ It is quite clear that due to the region’s geographical location, conflicts had not been insulated from foreign intervention. In this regard, Tamirat made the political organizations responsible in opening a gate for Sudanese mercenaries and the Oromo Liberation Front intervention in the political affairs of the region.¹³⁹ The Sudanese mercenaries were said to have various high ranking posts in the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State during the period of the Transitional Government. They were working towards the fulfillment of their hidden agenda, *i.e.*, to meet the interest of the Sudanese government.¹⁴⁰

Moreover, it was said that from its foundation, the region was being led by inexperienced and incapable personalities. Different posts of bureau and departments were given on the bases of tribe, blood relations and various forms of individual ties and interests.¹⁴¹ “Tribalism” and “narrow-mindedness” were pointed out as major problems of the region.¹⁴² Besides this, at that same conference, the Prime Minister disclosed that “The region has no any kind of police force and administration of justice in operation” hence the duties of these bodies were carried out by members of the Defense Force.¹⁴³

¹³⁶ *Addis Zaman*, Year 56, No. 343, *Sane* 1, 1988 E.C.

¹³⁷ *Addis Zaman*, Year 56, No. 344, *Sane* 2, 1988 E.C.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*; *Informants*: “Mr. Y”; “Mr. R”; “Mr. W”; “Mr. M”; “Mr. T”.

¹³⁹ *Addis Zaman*, Year 56, No. 344, *Sane* 2, 1988 E.C.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

In the end, the conference mainly condemned the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement and made this political organization responsible for the existing political instability of the region.¹⁴⁴ It is noteworthy that BPLM was basically the organization of the Barta ethnic group. It was said that the leaders of the BPLM were "mercenaries" and Sudanese in their nationality. Leaders of the BPLM who dominated the politics of the region during the period of the Transitional Government were now disintegrated. Evidence shows that some fled and took refuge in the Sudan while others started armed struggle in the Ethio-Sudanese border. Those who decided to remain in the region were working to establish their own Barta national regional state through peaceful legal procedures.¹⁴⁵ It is apparent that one of the major resolutions of the conference that necessitated a change in the basic organization structure of the Gumuz People's Liberation Movement, the Baro Shinasha People's Democratic Movement and other political organizations of the region was to strengthen them as a counter weigh against the BPLM,¹⁴⁶ which had already started armed struggle.

To enforce the aforementioned decisions of the conference, the regional council held its first extraordinary meeting in Asossa town for six days from June 18 to 23, 1996.¹⁴⁷ The extraordinary meeting of the regional council began to take measures on the basis of the resolutions of the "First Peace, Democracy and Development Conference". Subsequently, in July 1996, it dismissed seven executive committee members of the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement accused of embezzling government and public property. Among the sacked officials were the chairman, vice chairman and secretary of the BPLM. These high-ranking officials were also accused of "narrow-minded, dictators, power mongers and hindrance to the regions peace and development".¹⁴⁸

The extraordinary meeting also set off a major clean up among regional and zonal officials of the various bureaus and departments. Hence a number of higher officials of the regional state were dismissed from their posts: To mention: the region's president of General Justice, head of the Health Bureau as well as other junior authorities were dismissed from their posts. The

¹⁴⁴ *Addis Zaman*, Year 56, No. 348, *Sane* 7, 1988 E.C.; *Informants*: "Mr. M"; "Mr. W"; "Mr. M"; "Mr. T".

¹⁴⁵ *Addis Zaman*, Year 56, No. 348, *Sane* 7, 1988 E.C.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Addis Zaman*, Year 56, No. 351, *Sane* 11, 1988 E.C.

¹⁴⁸ *The Ethiopian Herald*, Vol. LII, No. 272, 31 July, 1996.

“corrective measure” was said to have been strong regarding the officials of the region’s Education Bureau, where the new president, *Ato* Yaregal, had previously worked.¹⁴⁹ The extraordinary meeting also dismissed the following regional and zonal officials: *Ato* Mustofa Mussa, secretary of the state, *Ato* Zewde Tarfa, head of the region’s Administrative and social Affairs, *Ato* Amare Belina, vice commissioner of the region’s police, Justice and Security, *Ato* Belew Alemu, Vice chairman of the Matakal Administrative Zone, *Ato* Alefahal Hassan, member of chief executive committee of Matakal Zone, and many others.¹⁵⁰ The meeting also suspended chiefs of the Matakal and Asossa Police Department heads who were accused of abused authority and embezzled government money. A number of regional and zonal officials were given warnings for various misdeeds.¹⁵¹ Particularly, the clean-up measure of the extraordinary meeting among members of the region’s police force was severe. The commissioner, deputy commissioner and other senior administrative officials of the Benishangul-Gumuz police were dismissed accused of alleged embezzlement and failure to carry out their responsibilities.¹⁵² In Asossa and Kamashi zones only, 103 policemen were fired. These policemen were accused of various misdeeds, such as, tribalism, corruption, unethical deeds, various crimes and failure to discharge public responsibilities. It was said that the police force of the region would be reorganized in line with the decision of the conference.¹⁵³

The appointment of new officials was made in line with the resolution of the “First Conference of Peace, Democracy and Development”. It was said that in the previous years, the composition and representation of ethnic groups was not taken into account. The former heads of bureaus and departments were said to have been assigned by orders of some officials. Hence, they were responsible for the embezzlement of government money and property.¹⁵⁴ That is why the conference had passed a resolution demanding the reorganization of bureaus and departments of the regional government.¹⁵⁵ The extraordinary meeting appointed new heads of bureaus, commissions and offices. As a result, a new president of the region’s Supreme Court was also appointed.¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁹*Addis Zaman*, Year 56, No. 338, *Ginbot* 25, 1988 E.C.; *Informants*: “Mr. Y”; “Mr. M”; “Mr. T”.

¹⁵⁰*Addis Zaman*, Year 56, No. 354, *Sane* 14, 1988 E.C.

¹⁵¹*The Ethiopian Herald*, Vol. LII, No. 253, 9 July, 1996.

¹⁵²*Ibid.*

¹⁵³*Addis Zaman*, Year 56, No. 384, *Hamle* 19, 1988 E.C.; *Informants*: “Mr. Y”; “Mr. R”; “Mr. T”.

¹⁵⁴*The Ethiopian Herald*, Vol. LII, No. 267, 25 July, 1996.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶*The Ethiopian Herald*, Vol. LII, No. 249, 4 July, 1996.

Moreover, seventy new department heads were also assigned by the regional state council in the end of July 1996.¹⁵⁷

To conclude, the 1996 “Peace, Democracy and Development Conference’s” resolutions and the subsequent measures created a vivid stable political situation in the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State. It is noteworthy that the continuous improvement of the political climate of the region can be inferred from the main agenda of the “Third Peace, Democracy and Development Conference” of the region in February 1999. At that time no major political problem of the region was raised; rather the Ethio-Eritrean war was the main agenda of the conference.¹⁵⁸ However, the first conference and the subsequent measures added more fuel on the burning flame of the conflict between the Barta and the Gumuz. Because from ethnic point of view, as it will become evident later, most of the regional and zonal officials dismissed from various posts were Bartas. Therefore, the political rivalry between the Gumuz and the Shinasha, on one hand, and the Barta, on the other hand, went on and off up until the 2000 nationwide election. Soon after the election for seats of the House of People’s Representatives and the Regional Council had been completed, the conflict between the two groups seemed to have been transformed quickly.

In the 2000 election the following political parties participated for both seats of the House of Representatives and Regional Council in the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State:

Table 1: For the House of Peoples Representatives¹⁵⁹

Name of Political Organizations	Male	Female	Total
Benishangul Gumuz Peoples Democratic United Front (BGPDUF)	9	-	9
Amhara Nation Democratic Movement (NADM)	-	-	-
Private	8	1	9
Total	17	1	18

¹⁵⁷ *The Ethiopian Herald*, Vol. LII, No. 267, 25 July, 1996.

¹⁵⁸ *Abiyotawi Demokrasi*, Year 9, No. 282, Yekatit 16-22, 1991 E.C.

¹⁵⁹ “Ba 1992 E.C. Bemikahedew Ya-Hizb Tewekayochina Ya-Kilil Mikir Betoch Abalat Mircha Layi Lemewedader Be-Ichunet Ye-Temezgebu Ye-Politika Partiwochina Ye-Gil Tewodadariwoch Bizat” (no date), p. 3.

Table 2: For the Regional Council¹⁶⁰

Name of Political Organizations	Male	Female	Total
Benishangul Gumuz Peoples Democratic United Front (BGPDUF)	65	10	75
Amhara Nation Democratic Movement (NADM)	1	1	2
Private	20	1	21
Total	86	12	98

These two tables clearly indicate that different political organizations of the region completed for the election under a common front. In other words the Barta, the Gumuz and other indigenous peoples of the region were campaigning under one political organization.

However, the conflict between the Barta and the Gumuz, which dominated power struggle in the state, was exacerbated soon after the 2000 election. The Ethiopian Barta People's Democratic Organization began to oppose the region's government that was elected to rule for the second next five years. Its members took stand against the founding conference of the regional council held in Asossa town from October 5 to 8, 2000.¹⁶¹ In 2001, it seems that the conflict between the Barta and the Gumuz to shake the regional government to its foundation.

The tension and cleavage between the Barta and the Gumuz culminated when the first asked for self-regional government in 2001. The Ethiopian Barta People's Democratic Organization (EBPDO) appealed to the House of Federation for self-administration to the Asossa area, where the Barta have predominantly settled, on the basis of the provisions of Article 47/3 of the Federal Constitution.¹⁶² The Barta party listed down factors that widened the gap between their party and the Gumuz-Shinasha dominated regional government as follows: First the Barta complained that in spite of their numerical superiority, they were not adequately represented in the region's government. Second, their people were subjugated to disproportionate distribution of development infrastructure. Third, the Barta complained that they were being perpetrated by the Regional State Administration. They stated

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Tomar*, Year 8, No. 25, *Tir* 23, 1993 E.C.

¹⁶² *Tomar*, Year 8, No. 30, *Megabit* 12, 1993 E.C.

that they were suffering a number of mal-administrative treatment and injustice including loss of job.¹⁶³

The Ethiopian Barta People's Democratic Organization made energetic efforts to establish a separate Barta regional state. When the response of the House of Federation delayed, thirteen Barta higher officials of the region signed letters of resignation in March 2001. According to *Tomar* Newspaper the names and posts of Barta officials who were willing to resign were:¹⁶⁴

Table 3: List of Barta officials who were willing to resign

No	Names	Positions
1	<i>Ato</i> Rashid Muhamad	Head of the Region's Emergency and Workers and Social Affairs Bureau
2	<i>Ato</i> Sharif Yisaq	Sport Commissioner
3	<i>Ato</i> Hussien Kadir	Department Head in Work and Urban Development Bureau
4	<i>Ato</i> Asharif Abdullahi	Department Head in Trade, Transport and Industry Bureau
5	<i>Ato</i> Abdullahi Muhammad Ali	Department Head in the Region's Civil Service Bureau
6	<i>Ato</i> Muhammad Nur Abdulkarim	Department Head in Plan Bureau
7	<i>Ato</i> Jamal Umer	Zone Health Department Head
8	<i>Ato</i> Mustofa Muhammad	Department Head (the name of the Bureau is not clearly identified)
9	<i>Ato</i> Nuradin Abdulkarim	Zone Agricultural Department Head
10	<i>Ato</i> Mustofa Ashafi	Department Head in Finance Bureau
11	<i>Ato</i> Amanu Hassen	Zone Finance Department Head
12	<i>Ato</i> Mustofa Abdullahi	Asossa Zone Militia Branch Office Head
13	W/ro Sitina Adam	Asossa Zone Women Affairs Department Head

Soon after this, the House of Federation decided to send a delegation to Asossa that would study the problem and would make recommendations. Subsequently, the delegation of the House of Federation arrived in Asossa in

¹⁶³*Tomar*, Year 8, No. 25, *Tir*23, 1993 E.C.

¹⁶⁴*Tomar*, Year 8, No. 29, *Megabit* 5, 1993 E.C.

March 2001. Members were: *Ato Ataklit Giday* (chairman), *Ato Zakariyas Megiso*, *Ato Daniel Demsie*, *Ato Muhammed Yesuf* and *Ato Samuel Alemayehu*.¹⁶⁵ The delegates organized a public forum where 250 Barta and 150 other ethnic groups' representatives took part. In the end of the forum, the delegates were said to have promised the Barta to report their grievances to the House of Federation.¹⁶⁶ But, in actual fact it seems that the delegates tried to convince the Barta to drop their ardent demand for self-regional government.

In April 2001, although it was easily controlled, some clashes between the Barta and the re-settlers of the Asossa area were reported. The cause of the conflict was said to have been a wide-spread rumor that when the Barta's achieved their demand for self-administration, they would force non-natives to leave from the Asossa area.¹⁶⁷ This conflict was easily handled before it wide-spread to wider areas. But the conflict between the Barta and the Gumuz elites continued as an unremitting menace to the region's peace.

It seems that the conflict between the two elites gained momentum when an assassination attempt was made on *Ato Abdul Muhammad Ibrahim*, vice president of the Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State, on 17 July 2001. He belonged to the Barta ethnic group. It was said that *Ato Abdul Muhammad* was wounded by members of the region's police commission, who had some kind of link with the president of the state, *Ato Yaregal Ayisheshim*, and belonged to the Gumuz ethnic group.¹⁶⁸ To conclude, in more broad terms the conflict between the Barta and the Gumuz political elites perpetuated on and off as a dominant political scene of the region up until 2001. However, later on the Barta elite seem to have abandoned their question for separate self-regional administration.

¹⁶⁵*Tomar*, Year 8, No. 30, *Megabit* 12, 1993 E.C.

¹⁶⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷*Tomar*, Year 8, No. 36, *Meyaziya* 24, 1993 E.C.

¹⁶⁸*Tomar*, Year 8, No. 48, *Hamle* 18, 1993 E.C.

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Informants

Since the study deals with a very contemporary and highly sensitive issue, I respected the right of my interview subjects who preferred to be anonymous. All informant names mentioned in the article are pseudonyms.