

Peripheral vs. Center-Seeking Nationalisms and Center-Periphery Relations in Ethiopia: Post-1991 Somali-Oromo Relations

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Abstract

Afar, Gambella, Somali, and Benishangul-Gumuz regions constitute a typology within Ethiopia's heterogeneous peripheries. Yet no previous classifications attend to the factors of trans-border existence, ethnic demography, and peripheral ethno-nationalism as criteria. These three factors subject these borderland peripheries in Ethiopia to the encounters with multiple centers. This shapes their national-level political agency in ways that perpetuate their peripherality in post-1991 Ethiopia. The focus of this paper is on one of these factors of being a borderland periphery in Ethiopia: peripheral ethno-nationalism (Somali nationalism) vis-à-vis an inter-center contestation between the post-1991 Ethiopian state center, the TPLF (Tigran People Liberation Front) center, and its Oromo center-seeking nationalist counterpart. A historical-analytical design, qualitative data (collected through one-month-long interviews in Jigjiga town of the Somali region), and historical-interpretive analysis are used. The study finds that previous works on Somali-Oromo relations overlook Somali's peripheral nationalism. This is not only vis-à-vis successive Ethiopian government centers but also with Oromo center-seeking nationalism. This triangular dynamic, the paper shows, shaped the Somali region's entry into a peripherality-perpetuating asymmetrical 'reciprocity' with the TPLF center, the main dispenser behind the post-1991 ethno-federal framework. This 'reciprocity' allowed the pro-regime Somali elite to play a nationally consequential political agency of holding one 'peripheral' end for the TPLF in its inter-center contestation with its Oromo center-seeking nationalism, while also entrenching a repressive regional despotism in the Somali region.

Keywords: Center-periphery relations, center-seeking nationalism, peripheral nationalism, Somali-Oromo relations

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Background

The center-periphery paradigm and its 'peripheralist methodology' (Triulzi, 1984; Donham, 1986) entered Ethiopia's historiography as a colonialist scholarly intervention. It posits an imperialist parallel to the consolidation of the modern Ethiopian state (Elleni, 2019, pp. 39-40; Korf et al., 2013, p. 886; Reid, 2011, p. 18; Triulzi, 1984, p. 359; Donham, 1986, pp. 37-44; Keller, 1995, p. 625). Its 'internal colonialism' (Hatcher, 1974; Hind, 1985) approach to modern Ethiopian state formation emphasizes culture and geography in constituting Ethiopia's center in terms of Amhara/Habesha/Abyssinian and the rest as its peripheries². The post-empire contextualization of this distinction views the relation between "core and peripheries as a much more fluid ambivalent interaction" (Clapham, 2002, p. 9) and/or no longer "a hierarchical arrangement" (Donham 2002, p. 2) but more "interdependent" (Bach, 2009, p. 13). This reframing could not render the center-periphery distinction irrelevant. It shifts the geographical or cultural conception of centers and periphery to groups' relative position in "the structure and distribution of political power" (Abbink, 2002, p. 157). Insightful in this regard is Bach's (2009, pp. 9-12) intra-sectoral relations (between center and periphery) and inter-sectoral (within the center/the periphery) framework. In particular, the inter-sectoral dynamic broadens the conception of centers in Ethiopia beyond regime centers. This makes it possible to consider the issue of Ethiopia's multiple centers as an additional vantage point to center-periphery studies in Ethiopia. However, this non-spatial conception overlooks three factors that collectivize Ethiopia's Afar, Gambella, Somali, and Benishangul-Gumuz as Ethiopia's borderland-peripheries. These are trans-border existence, ethnic demography, and peripheral nationalism. These are the factors that interposition (subject) Ethiopia's borderland-peripheries vis-à-vis the multiple centers that contest for the Ethiopian center since at least the early 1970s. This paper focuses on one of the three factors (i.e., peripheral nationalism) in one of the four borderland-periphery regions (i.e., Somali). This is to show how encounters with multiple centers by Ethiopia's borderland peripheries simultaneously give but also limit their national-level consequential political agency.

²Menassemay critiqued the paradigm for indifference to "active historical agency of Oromo, Sidama, Wālayita, Somali, Harari, Gurage, Tigreans, and Ethiopian Muslims in the construction of Ethiopia as *agār* and Ethiopians as *hizb*" (2023, p. 27).

Conceptual framework

The two dominant approaches to political agency by peripheries, the paper argues, do not capture the peripheral groups' political agency, with its paradox of possibility and limit. The 'passive margin' approach—a "popular reading of Ethiopian peripheries [as] powerless and severely marginalized" (Matashanda, 2015, p. 46) - hardly gives them consequential national political agency. While an improvement for recognizing political agency by borderlanders, the second, i.e., center-margin approach (Dereje & Hohane, 2010), overlooks a peripherality accruing from "mutually reinforcing effects between peripherality and boundary location" (House, 1980, p. 458). Thus, the passive-margin and center-margin approaches mistake these peripheries' relative distance for non-consequential political agency and their adjustment for a wholesale 'centering' of them, respectively. Thus, a balanced approach to political agency by Ethiopia's borderland-peripheries should incorporate their encounters with multiple centers, which is the key aspect of their peripherality. This makes the concept of representational liminality and resultant political strategies a better framework. It balances Ethiopia's borderland-peripheries' relative distance from the multi-center contestations for the Ethiopia center with their adjustment to it since at least the 1970s. for representational liminality pertains to groups' "practice of repositioning themselves into one of the existing categories" (Rumelili, 2012, p. 498). This shapes their strategies of dealing with the different centers into:

strategies for permanent periphery in which peripheries accept the idea of themselves as permanent, yet safe and reliable peripheries to one center as opposed to another through *active formulating of their own initiatives and ideas without trying to become what they cannot—the center* (Jakniunaite, 2020, p. 238, emphasis added).

The paper shows how encounters with multiple centers³ not only allow a nationally consequential political agency by Ethiopia's borderland-peripheries (i.e., affecting national politics) but also limits it (i.e., inability to overcome their peripherality).

³This parallels the idea of straddling multiple and competing centers that gives representational liminality an analytical use in center-periphery relations as Jakniunaite shows in Baltic States' interposition (subject) between Russia and EU (Jakniunaite, 2020).

Multiple centers, Ethiopia's borderland-peripheries and political agency

First, a political geography of trans-border existence is one of the center-multiplying factors. It subjects border-straddling groups to the pressures of interaction with adjacent neighboring governments-centers in their respective national capitals (Onha, 2015; House, 1980; Henrikson, 2011). The impact of this dynamic on the political agency of the border-straddling groups stems from a Kopytoffian idea of hybridity. This views borderlands "not just sites for receiving constant pressure from the center [or centers] but as creative spaces involving gaps, ambiguities, and fissures" (Wendl & Rosler, 1999, pp. 11-12). Ethiopia's borderland peripheries' encounter with this inter-center interaction has manifested in the form of trans-border nationalism from adjacent states and Ethiopia's response to it. The second multiplier of centers in Ethiopia's borderland peripheries is the inter-group dynamics brought on by 19th-century modern Ethiopia's territorialization in its eastern and western frontiers. This is a Kopytoffian dynamic in which the frontier, which from the vantage point of the incoming groups is an "extension from the center," is a homeland for the indigenous population (Newbury, 1987, p. 164). The impact of this inter-group dynamic on political agency comes from the convergence and divergence these two groups have with multiple contestants for the Ethiopian center. The third multiplier of centers is the ubiquity of ethno-nationalist insurgencies in Ethiopia since at least the 1970s. This obscures the need for a vital distinction among them. One such distinction is between *peripheral ethno-nationalism* and "center-seeking rebellions."⁴ (Fearon & Latin, 2003, p. 81). This is based on an ethno-nationalist insurgency's relative position vis-à-vis the two options of overcoming the center: 'exit' from or 'replacement' of the center. In the ethno-nationalist remaking of the Ethiopian center, for instance, Tigrayan and Oromo nationalisms oscillated between the two options, while Eritrean nationalism achieved the former. Peripheral nationalism, defined by the relative absence, 'invisibility,' and lower consequentiality of its features, has characterized ethno-nationalist insurgencies in Afar, Benishangul-

⁴Reid's (2011, p. 247-256) characterization of Ethiopia's 'Nilotic' and 'northern' frontiers as "fertile frontiers" and "center margins" eliminate the element of peripherality from the former altogether. Others limit the contrast to Oromo nationalism and its northern counter parts (Clapham, 2002). Fekadu's (2011, p. 773) view of Oromo nationalism as one of the "three competing and overlapping nationalisms" influencing Somali nationalism does not explicit if Oromo nationalism is a center-seeking nationalism in Ethiopia.

Gumuz Gambella and Somali regions⁵ since the early 1970s. Thus, the distinction reframes the relationship between, for example, Oromo nationalism and its Gumuz or Somali counterpart as a relation between a center-seeking nationalism and peripheral nationalism, respectively. This is instead of an inter-periphery relation as implied by Markakis's designation of both as peripheries, albeit as highland and lowland (Markakis, 2012). In general, peripheral nationalism, ethno-demography, and trans-border existence do not preclude a nationally consequential political agency as much as they recondition it into perpetuating peripherality. Showing the role of Ethiopia's borderland-peripheries' encounters with multiple centers in this dynamic is the main objective of the study. The specific focus is on a triangular dynamic involving a peripheral ethno-nationalism of an Ethiopia's borderland-periphery (Somali) in its encounters with multiple centers. These are center-seeking Oromo nationalism and its inter-center contestation with state centers (both in Ethiopia and in the Somalia Republic). While historical patterns are considered, the temporal context of the study is post-1991 Ethiopia's context of the ethno-federal framework. This has seen, at least formally, these peripheries' reorganization as secession-right-holding regions.

Literature review

Somali-Oromo relations: Beyond an inter-periphery perspective

The dominant approach to Somali-Oromo relations takes an inter-periphery perspective. For instance, Markakis (2012) designated both as 'peripheries,' albeit 'lowland' and 'highland,' respectively. While opposition to an Ethiopian regime's centers formed a shared commonality between the two nationalisms (Lencho, 2004), they showed a qualitatively contrastable trajectory in overcoming them. Even at the height of its militant insurgency in the 1970s, Somali nationalism was dominated by the irredentist persuasion of exiting from Ethiopia, but only to join another center in the Somali Republic (Lencho, 2004; Gebru, 2009; Michael, 2018). This outward orientation can be contrasted with center-seeking nationalisms such as Tigray and Oromia, whose oscillation between exit from and replacing the center options could not understate their demonstrably consequential inward-

⁵Somali nationalism, most visible and militant of the Ethiopian borderland-peripheries, sought to overcome the Ethiopian center via joining another center in the Somalia Republic between 1960s and 1980s. This is before its shift to the exit option as represented by ONLF (Ogaden National Liberation Front) since mid-1980s got more complicated by the post-irredentist dynamics (Vaughan, 2019; Michael, 2018) and by Ethiopia's post-1991 ethno-federal framework (Abdullahi, 2007).

looking orientation (Kalifa & Doornbos, 2002, p. 88; Semahagn, 2014, p. 117; Fekadu, 2011, p. 776).⁶

The 20th-century emergence of Oromo⁷ nationalism as a key player within inter-center contestation in Ethiopia is also contrastable with the Somali (together with Afar, indigenous groups in Gambella, and Benishangul), which maintained a relative distance from it (Asnake, 2009, p. 181; Markakis, 2012; Michael, 2018, p. 200; Fekadu, 2011, p. 775; Vaughan, 2019, p. 103; Meckelburg, 2017, p. 173; Scheele, 2021, p. 135; Abdussamad, 1995, p. 55; Baharu, 1976, p. 13; Reid, 2011, p. 138; Tesfaye, 2018, p. 230). In fact, Ethiopian Somali ethno-nationalism directly entered an inter-center dynamic, but only vis-à-vis the Somalia Republic, not within Ethiopia. Asnake's designation of Ethiopia's Somali as "significant to Mogadishu but periphery to Addis Ababa" (2009, p. 182) captures this relative distance.

Also contrastable is the two nationalisms' entry into the post-1991 ethno-federal framework. Oromo nationalism entered the post-1991 period with built-in 'central' features vis-à-vis its Somali counterpart in Ethiopia. For it only compromised its independence persuasion into becoming one of the dominant ethno-demographic political constituencies, culminating in the post-2018 remaking of the post-1991 Ethiopian center by an Oromo-core (Redai, 2023). Somali nationalism, in relative contrast, entered the post-1991 framework with its irredentist pan-Somali persuasion suffering a major blow, and its post-irredentist elite in Ethiopia's Somali region divided no less by their response to the post-1991 ethno-federal framework (Abdullahi, 2007; Vaughan, 2019; Michael, 2018).

⁶With the exception of Afar, OLF displayed a hegemonic tendency on identity groups in Ethiopia's borderland periphery, which were also fighting their own 'liberation'. Some noted how OLF made the acceptance of the idea of 'black Oromo' and 'Somali-speaking Oromos' as a condition for cooperation (Young, 1999; Mecklenburg, 2017).

⁷Oromo were one of the players in western frontier in competition with Christian forces (Meckelburg, 2017, p. 173). Scheele states that Oromos "in former western Wollega have divided up land in Benishangul Gumuz and allotted it to their clans [where] the Gumuz had [either to] join Oromo clans or withdraw into remote areas not yet effectively controlled by either Ethiopia or the Sudan" (2021, p. 135). In Benishangul "Oromo were historically dominant over Gumuz and Shinasha" (Abdussamad, 1995, p. 55). The "little contact" Anyuaa and Nuer had with highland Ethiopian in pre-19th C "was mainly with Oromo inhabiting highlands of most of present-day Wallaga and Illubabor" (Baharu, 1976, p. 13).

Methods

The study uses the borderland-peripheries' own comparison of multiple centers as an interpretative vantage point. It approaches Somali-Oromo relations evolving from the irredentist era, which defines their horizontal relations at the beginning of their militant ethno-nationalist insurgencies in Ethiopia, to post-1991 Ethiopia's ethno-federal framework. A qualitative historical-interpretative analytical design is adopted. The interviews for this study were conducted in Jigjiga (the regional capital of the Somali region) from December 2-28, 2022. Secondary sources are drawn from books, journals, and legal documents. The primary data collected via interviews aimed at capturing the experiences of the people being under studied (Stake, 1994). Thus, the focus is on perceptual rather than factual dimensions. While the study uses Somali views as its data collection and analysis vantage point, it does not lose sight of non-Somalis residing in the data collection site (Oromos included), i.e., Jigjiga town. As the study is broadly about intergroup political interaction, non-ethnic Somalis were also part of the data collection. This helps overcome the potential urban bias of the data, forced by the researcher's own security consideration, as ethnicity is largely but not exclusively an urban phenomenon. The interview questions, therefore, sought to get Somali perception on the relationship between WSLF⁸/SALF⁹ and Somalia Republic's irredentist agenda, the relation of cooperation and conflict between militant Somali ethno-nationalists such as WSLF and OLF¹⁰ in pre-1991 period and on the relation between TPLF¹¹ and OLF in the post-1991 remaking of Ethiopian center. To capture Somali's view of the inter-center dynamics in post-1991 period interview question focus on Somali's view of their region's 'affiliate' status during the EPRDF¹² era (with its TPLF/Tigray core) vis-à-vis their Oromo counterpart that made the four constituent part of the Front in the form of OPDO¹³. The post-2018 graduation of Somali regional ruling party into an element of the national ruling party of PP¹⁴ (with its alleged Oromo core) was also part of the interview questions.

⁸ Western Somalia Liberation Front

⁹ Somali Abo Liberation Front

¹⁰ Oromo Liberation Front

¹¹ Tigrayan people Liberation Front

¹² Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

¹³ Oromo People Democratic Organization

¹⁴ Prosperity Party

Selection of interviewees and considerations in trustworthiness

As a non-Somali making first ever fieldwork in Somali region¹⁵ with a very sensitive topic, the researcher anticipated a challenge to data collection. This was demonstrated in failed attempts to get interviews from people at ONLF headquarters in Jigjiga. In fact, this was one of the instances where being a non-Somali on the part of the researcher hinders data collection. Thus, the few ONLF viewpoints quoted are hardly primary as they were gathered from people whose ONLF 'credential' was vouched for by other interviewees and internet sources. As a university instructor, the researcher started from a familiar setting at Jigjiga University. This helped the researcher manage to build academic reputé enough to secure contact information. Twenty-five interviewees from different walks of life (determined by data saturation) formed the four categories of interviewees, adding a level of credibility to the interview data. The question of representativeness this brings to the fore was how to give this purposively chosen sample universe a 'diversity' of vantage points. The first was people approached randomly at different locales in Jigjiga. Officials/civil servants in the regional bureaucracy form the second category, which, due to the Somali region's rather deep 'indigenizing' or better 'Somaliaization' of the regional bureaucracy, reflects a strong Somali view. The third category involved members of the Somali region's ruling party and regionally operating opposition parties. Approaching high-level ruling party officials proved daunting, demanding more 'vetting' of the researcher's credentials and was limited to lower-rank office functionaries. The researcher could not also find any national-level opposition party operating in the Somali region's regional capital. The fourth category, which has shown relative openness, was drawn from Jigjiga University and NGOs (noticeably present in Jigjiga). The study tries to ensure trustworthiness and credibility by focusing on the perceptual rather than factual dimension of response. In an attempt to meet the requirement of conformability, the study uses previous works as a basis for triangulation. Certain local specificities notwithstanding, this study and its outcomes can be replicated in other of Ethiopia's borderland-periphery regions.

Result and Findings

Somali nationalism, irredentism and center seeking Oromo nationalism

¹⁵While this fieldwork was the first for Somali region, an academic interest in approaching the Ethiopian state from the vantage point of Ethiopia's historical peripheries has taken the researcher to Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz regions as well since 2010. See Dawit, B. (2011).

Oromo center-seeking nationalism subjecting Somali nationalism to its inter-center contestations with state centers is not a post-1991 novelty. OLF's¹⁶ early position that Oromo-adjacent Somalis are part of the Oromo nation (Fekadu, 2011, p. 775) was posited against the irredentist Somalia Republic. The later also contested OLF's claims in Harar and Bale provinces (Markakis, 2012; Michael, 2018, p. 200; Fekadu, 2011, p. 775). Thus, Somali nationalism in Ethiopia, and its dependence on Somalia Republic's irredentist project, undercut a potential alliance with Oromo nationalism in an otherwise "common" struggle (Lencho, 2004, p. 133) against the Ethiopian center. The defeat of the irredentist project directly limited its national-level consequentiality of its proponents on the Ethiopian side. For instance, the desire to stop the expansionist policy of the Somalia Republic made the Dergue regime give weapons and administrative posts to southern Oromo clans, to the frustration of southern Somali clans (Tsfaye, 2018, p. 230). This should not, however, understate the consequentiality of the irredentist-driven Somali nationalism in Ethiopia's inter-center contestation in which Oromo nationalism has been a contestant. The irredentist-backed WSLF, for instance, contributed to the relative "weaknesses" of OLF in its insurgency against the Dergue regime since the 1970s (Michael, 2018, pp. 238-239). Thus, Somali nationalism's relative distance from the inter-center contestation in Ethiopia, relative to its Oromo nationalist counterpart, formed the background to the post-1991 ethno-nationalist remaking of Ethiopia's center. In fact, post-1991 ethnic framework has its own role in shaping the consequentiality and limits of Somali's political agency in its own right. However, the section below shows the triangular dynamics on Somali's peripheral political agency of a post-1991 inter-center contestation that involves the TPLF-core state center and its center-seeking Oromo nationalism counterpart.

Inter-center contestation in post-1991 Ethiopia and Somali nationalism

Somali nationalism (with its ONLF-led secessionist aim) entered the post-1991 remaking of the Ethiopian center while trying to adjust to the realities of post-irredentism. Oromo nationalism, on the other hand, was in the relatively advantageous position of being a co-partner, first in the form of the uneasy TPLF-OLF alliance and then under the EPRDF framework. In spite of this horizontal asymmetry in entry, the dispensation earned its core dispenser, the TPLF-core post-1991 Ethiopian center, a reputation for "giving Somalis an independent

¹⁶In fact, with the exception of the Afar, OLF has been known to have displayed a hegemonic tendency with regard to identity groups in Ethiopia's borderland periphery regions, which were also fighting their own 'liberation'.

country in all but name."¹⁷ The Somali elite's division in response to it notwithstanding, (Abdullahi, 2007) the dispensation has also aligned with the pro regime Somali elite¹⁸ and its desire to associate the role they "prefer to be played by the Somali region [i.e.] the functional Somali territory in the Horn of Africa".¹⁹ However, there were two patterns in Somali-Oromo relations that formed the background to post-1991 Ethiopia. The first was OLF's 'hegemonic' tendency shown in its demand as a condition for cooperation with SALF and WSLF that Oromia-adjacent Somalis accept themselves as Somali-speaking Oromo (Fekadu, 2011; Michael, 2018; Vaughan, 2019; Lencho, 2004). The other was the absence of any meaningful convergence between ONLF and OLF in their common fight against the TPLF center, except "in the desert of Eritrea since the early 1990s."²⁰ These patterns gave TPLF's claims of an emancipator a historical credential among its pro-regime elite in the Somali region.

Countering and/or regulating Oromo center-seeking nationalism on the part of TPLF has as its component Ethiopia's borderland peripheries (the Somali region in this case) and their historical and contemporary relations with center-seeking nationalisms (Oromo in this case). The post-1991 reorganizing of Ethiopia's borderland peripheries as ethno-federal constituencies not only contrast the TPLF center vis-à-vis the defunct pan-Somali irredentism or the pre-1991 Ethiopian government centers but also with other center-seeking nationalisms in Ethiopia, with which Somalis have a long history of competition, i.e., Oromo nationalism. TPLF's balancing of the inescapable creation of Oromia as the largest titular region with its regime-threatening potential has one outcome of territorializing the Somali-Oromia inter-regional border of 1400 km, in which the former half *encircles* Oromia as ethnic 'firewall'.

Somali-Oromo relations are one of the three²¹ factors that shape Somali's reception to the TPLF-sanctioned ethno-federal framework. This can be learned from Somali interviewees' universal "no" answer if they think the post-1991 territorialization is conceivable if TPLF and OLF changed positions. Somali-

¹⁷Interview with a long-time resident of (40 years) JigJiga (04/01/2022)

¹⁸The Ph.D. dissertation that this paper was a part of has a chapter on how the Somali elite division impacts the consequentiality and limits of Somali peripheral political agency.

¹⁹Interview with a Somali employee of NGO operating in JigJiga and Hargeisa (22/01/2022).

²⁰Interview with a non-Somali long time resident of JigJiga (more than 40 years) JigJiga (04/01/2022)

²¹The other two issues covered in the Ph. D dissertation, to which this paper is a part of, are trans-border nationalism and Somali-region's post-1991 titular status.

Oromo relation is also one of the few factors that cut across clan division. In the specific context of the Isaaq (Somali) and Ittu (Oromo) conflicts between 1991 and 2000s, the Isaaq, which otherwise are disgruntled by TPLF's (EPRDF) pro-Ogadeni tendencies within Somali region, found the "government's concerns about the Ittu's support to the Oromo Liberation Front that led to their increasing disarmament to tilt the balance of power in their (Isaaq) favor" (Richards & Gezu, 2011, pp. 19-20). Thus, as part of TPLF's 'good' reputation among the Somali is its role in "keeping Oromo's long-staying claim over Somali territories and Somali communities".²² The "Isaaq, who view our [i.e., Amhara] presence in a less adversarial sense did not show the same to Oromos."²³ This Somali disaggregation of non-Somali reached a high point in 2016. In 2016, for instance, people "temporarily detained mistaken for Oromo [were] released after [them] being [a non-Oromo] was vouched for by [their] Somali neighbors"²⁴. In 2017, Abdi Illye's special force (taken by Isaaq to be an Ogadeni militia) was involved on the side of the Isaaq (Hagmann & Kalifa, 2005, p. 34). TPLF's dominance within EPRDF is said to have one "benefit of controlling expansionist tendencies of Oromo nationalists towards Somali region".²⁵ Divided as the Somali elite was to the ethnic federal framework, (Abdullahi, 2007) the pro-TPLF group used, as political resource, TPLF's insecurity of OLF "to continuously arm themselves"²⁶ and, as Abdi Illye did, "undermine" the 2004 referendum (Hagmann & Kalifa, 2005, p. 34). In fact, "undermine" would not be the correct word for a Somali who sees "OPDO's position within EPRDF for allowing the officials of Oromia to distort the process and outcome of the [2004] inter-regional referendum from Addis Ababa."²⁷ Somali's awareness of their nationally consequential political agency goes as far as claiming "Somali region [to be] one of the factors that 'pushed'²⁸ Oromo nationalism towards Addis Ababa".²⁹ In fact during the 2017 Somali-Oromo crisis Abdi Illye is said to have claimed to "deny OLF a direct territorial access to Horn of Africa."³⁰ TPLF's beholdenness to this pro-regime Somali elite

²²Interview with Ibid

²³Interview with Ibid

²⁴Interview with a 'habesha' resident of JigJiga town (05/01/2022)

²⁵Interview with a Somali instructor at JigJiga University (16/01/2022)

²⁶Interview with a Somali instructor at JigJiga University (16/01/2022)

²⁷Interview with a Somali employee in the regional bureaucracy (09/01/2022)

²⁸This is a different take to the otherwise commonplace reference by Oromo nationalism and its claim of Addis Ababa as its center.

²⁹Interview with a non-Somali long-time resident of JigJiga town (07/01/2022)

³⁰Interview with a non-Somali long-time resident of JigJiga town (07/01/2022)

who made “the enemies of *woyane*; ONLF, OLF and *al shabab*”³¹ his own, added to his regional power unbeknown to his predecessors”.³² In general, mutual political resourcing between a government center and an Ethiopian borderland periphery in their contestation with a center-seeking nationalism has shown how nationally consequential Somali's political agency has been in holding TPLF's peripheral end in its contestation with its Oromo challenger. However, the inherent asymmetry in this center-periphery 'convergence' has the downside of entrenching regional elites in the Somali region who are too divided, autocratic, and dependent to pursue the goals of genuine de-peripheralization. The role of Oromo nationalism in reinforcing this peripherality-perpetuating asymmetrical reciprocity of convergence between Somali and the TPLF center can further be seen in relation to Somali disaggregation of national ruling parties beyond the claims of 'coalition' by EPRDF and 'unified party' by the Prosperity Party.

A Somali disaggregation of national ruling parties: From EPRDF to PP³³

The idea of inter-regional relations affected by one of the regions providing the ethnic constituency to the core of the state center in ethno-federal Ethiopia has been observed in Afar-Tigray relations (Markakis, 2021, pp. 95-105). The pro-regime elite in the Somali region attempted to use, as a political resource, the intra-party asymmetry within the EPRDF (with TPLF being at the top) to counter its powerful neighboring region (Oromia) and/or advance its interest against it. This has reached its height during the Abdi Illye era. Such Somali opinions as "there never really was EPRDF but TPLF"³⁴ indicate Somali's awareness of the vitality ethnicity gained in post-1991 Ethiopia. This stands in contradistinction to what Markakis said of Somali “indifference to the national character of the regime that claimed their territory” (2005, p. 54). Somali's ethnic-based disaggregating of national ruling parties survives the post-2018 creation of PP as a unified national ruling party, apparently ‘correcting’ TPLF's alleged sedentary bias,³⁵ and its decision to have a Somali for the party deputy. The apparent post-ethnic rhetoric that accompanied the formation of Prosperity Party has its Somali detractors. They

³¹Similar reasoning is given by Mustafi's regional government following his special force's “successful” repealing of *al shabab*'s incursion into Somali region, which “targeted” to join the anti-regime Oromo elements in Oromia

³²Interview with a ‘habesha’ resident of JigJiga (04/01/2022)

³³Prosperity Party

³⁴Interview with a Somali member of the regional Prosperity Party chapter (12/01/2022)

³⁵EPRDF's “agro-pastoral sedentarization put the viability of pastoralism [in Afar] into question” (Markakis, 2021, p. 95-105).

view it as “ungrateful attempt to dismiss the gains of TPLF’s ethnic federalism”³⁶ that “utterly missed the indebtedness the Somalis have to the TPLF government”.³⁷ For some even under the best of intentions, “it is difficult for PP to change the perception among Somali who associate Addis Ababa as a place for regionally disreputable Somali politicians.”³⁸ Taken by itself, the change to Prosperity Party has a potential to improve Somali region’s national standing vertically. However, this prospect is mediated by an inter-regional dynamics between Somali and Oromia regions. Some attribute the relative peace between post-TPLF Somali and Oromia regions to PP’s success in providing a symmetric framework for the two regions’ officials to sort out things in cooperative spirit.³⁹ Others attributed it to “President Mustafe’s realization of his region’s utter weakness vis-a-vis Oromia”.⁴⁰ PP’s alleged Oromo-core makes its position in Somali-Oromo relation to be everything but neutral. Somali views include those who “doubt PP’s ability to control extreme Oromo nationalists’ from disturbing Somali region”,⁴¹ to others who view PP for “emboldening intrusion into Somali territories by Shimeles (Oromia’s president)”.⁴² While the post-2018 relative inter-regional peace gives an impression of de-escalating inter-regional polarity, the two regions have yet to inter-regionally handle the issue of IDPs, instead preferring to relocate them to sites within their own regions (Fekadu & Debela, 2023, p. 40).

Inter-clan dynamics, which often subject the Somali region to political manipulation by outside actors, are likely to survive in post-2018 Ethiopia. The post-2018 relegation of negotiations with the ONLF to the Somali region by the PP, against the Front’s insistence on dealing with the federal government, and its lower-magnitude conflicts with the same Ogadeni clan-core regional ruling party (Hagmann & Mustafe, 2020) have the potential to open the Somali region to center-induced intra-clan division. In general, the transition from an affiliate to full membership status brought on by the PP represents a key national-level shift in Somali-Oromo relations. For if the TPLF-core center provided political resources to the Somali region, its replacement by an Oromo-core PP would shift them to Oromia.

³⁶Interview with a Somali instructor at JigJiga University (16/01/2022)

³⁷Interview with a non-Somali interviewee (07/01/2022)

³⁸Interview with a Somali instructor at JigJiga University (16/01/2022)

³⁹Interview with an instructor (non-Somali) at JigJiga University (11/01/2022)

⁴⁰Interview with a ‘habesha’ long-time resident of JigJiga town (15/01/2022)

⁴¹Interview with a Somali employee at an INGO operating in JigJiga (14/01/2022)

⁴²Interview with a Somali claiming very ‘intimate’ knowledge of ONLF (05/01/2022)

Discussion

Inability and/or unwillingness to integrate Ethiopia's eastern frontier into the mainstream 'center,' together with the built-in 'irredentist' and/or 'outward'-looking posture (more so since Somalia's 1960 independence), positions Somali nationalism in Ethiopia as peripheral. However, the bifurcation of modern Ethiopia's 'mainstream' center, more visibly since the 1960s, put Oromo nationalism into a center-seeking position in Ethiopia, pursuing 'exit' or 'replacement' options as its goals for the ethno-nationalist remaking of the Ethiopian center. However, the relative weakness of the OLF in either of these options (Clapham, 1990) until at least 2018, on the one hand, and the failure of the irredentist agenda, on the other, subject both to encounters with asymmetrical relations (actual or perceived) vis-à-vis successive Ethiopian state centers. This shared commonality contributes to the tendency of approaching Somali-Oromo relations in terms of inter-periphery dynamics where the issues of peripheral disunity/unity are emphasized and their respective peripheral and center-seeking nationalisms are overlooked (Lencho, 2004; Markakis, 2012; Asnake, 2009; Scheele, 2013). What this inter-periphery perspective overlooks, therefore, are the most important dynamics that give Somali nationalism in Ethiopia its national-level political agency, on the one hand, and its limitation in overcoming its continued peripherality, on the other. The study locates this in the triangular dynamics in which Oromo nationalism is an inter-center contestant to the TPLF center. In its attempt to legitimize the post-1991 political order in Ethiopia's borderland-periphery space, the TPLF-core center not only accentuated its "emancipatory" role in contrast to previous Ethiopian centers⁴³ (Samatar, 2007, p. 1149). Equally, TPLF contrasted itself with its center-seeking alternatives. In this regard, TPLF's well-known contrast of itself against its Oromo center-seeking challenger has an element of 'pathologizing' Oromo nationalism in the eyes of Somalis, aligning with Somali nationalism's relative asymmetry to and views of Oromo nationalism as hegemonic. This drove the violently imposed pro-regime dependent Somali elite into a peripherality-perpetuating reciprocity with TPLF, shaping its strategy of using TPLF center as political resource and its toleration of TPLF's retreat from the promise of regional autonomy. For Somalis, the hard choice has been between an Ethiopian state center willing enough to offer an

⁴³ An interviewee observed that "CUD underrated how easy it is for TPLF to tag the much hated name; Dergue to its [i.e. CUD's] supports in Somali region [which in turn shows how CUD] utterly missed the indebtedness the Somali have to TPLF" (Interview with a non-Somali interviewee, 07/01/2022).

unprecedented, at least normatively, regional autonomy for Somalis and a center-seeking nationalism with a history of 'hegemonic' proclivity, potentially representing a reversal of the post-1991 gains in the eyes of Ethiopia's borderland-peripheries (Somali in this case).

Conclusion: Reciprocal instrumentality between un-equals

The main addition of this study to center-periphery studies in Ethiopia is showing how an encounter with multiple centers introduces a peripherality-perpetuating dynamic on Ethiopia's borderland-peripheries' national-level political agency. This is demonstrated by the encounter of these peripheries (Somali in this case) with multiple centers contesting for the Ethiopian center since 1991. These include the TPLF-core state center and its center-contestant counterpart, Oromo center-seeking nationalism. This triangular dynamic shows that Oromo center-seeking nationalism (historically and in contemporary times) contributes to the rather unprecedented convergence between the regional elite in Ethiopia's borderland-periphery (Somali region in this case) and the TPLF-core state center. In this regard, what is rarely observed in studies on Somali-Oromo relations is what the TPLF-sanctioned ethno-federal dispensation offered the Somali elite. This is akin to what Cass, in a different context, states as "the question is not whether the [TPLF] agenda will [or should] lose but rather to what" (cited in Sandel, 2022, p. 216). In fact, this center-periphery 'convergence' between an Ethiopian borderland-periphery and the state center has been a relationship of reciprocal instrumentality but between unequals. This reciprocity has a peripherality-perpetuating outcome. For the TPLF-core center offered a political resource for the Somali elite to entrench regional despotism. However, there is another side to this reciprocity that indicates Somali's national-level political agency in post-1991 Ethiopia. The borderland-periphery regional elite (in the Somali region) held one peripheral end for the TPLF center in its inter-center contestation vis-à-vis Oromo's center-seeking nationalism. This reached its zenith during the decade-long rule of Abdi Illye. Thus, the post-2018 transition from a TPLF-core state center to Oromo-core PP, apparent or real, is a key national-level change in Somali's encounters with multiple centers: having a core constituency for the national ruling party for a regional neighbor. In general, the triangular contextualization of an asymmetrical reciprocity between an Ethiopian state center and its borderland-periphery of the Somali region is an alternative approach to the Ethiopian state problematic, which has been dominantly seen as a dyadic inter-center dynamic, by adding the vantage point of Ethiopia's borderland peripheries.

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