

Ethiopia's MoU with Somaliland: A case of diplomacy gone awry in Africa's history

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By Seife Tadelle

Recently, we witnessed a signing ceremony of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for sea access between the Ethiopian Prime Minister and the de facto administration of Somaliland's President on January 1, 2024. Ethiopia, a founding member of the League of Nations, the Organization of African Unity, and the United Nations, could not possibly enter and ratify an agreement in violation of all international and regional norms.

I acknowledge the necessity for Ethiopia to secure maritime access as a fundamental aspect of its developmental rights and as a component of the goal for regional unity. This privilege is not limited to Ethiopia alone but also applies to other landlocked African nations such as South Sudan, Uganda, and Rwanda. The response to this crucial issue is determined by the AU Constitutive Act and other relevant treaties. However, seeking a shortcut to the problem may yield immediate solutions but could have negative consequences in the medium and long term.

The only means for landlocked countries to gain access to the sea is through political and economic union at the sub-regional and regional levels. While the existing structure of the African Union and the regional economic communities (RECs) may be inadequate, member nations have the authority to advocate for their agenda in the most suitable manner. Any other short diversion does not provide assistance.

Somaliland, located in the Horn of Africa, is a de facto state that is generally recognized as an integral part of Somalia on an international level. It is imperative that the Ethiopian government refrain from intervening in the internal affairs of a neighboring sovereign country, especially considering two fundamental instances. The historical border conflict in 1977, followed by ongoing antagonism between the two nations, remains unresolved, although some improvements have been made.

The Ethiopian government's membership in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Union places it in the same position of accountability as the Federal Republic of Somalia. Both nations are obliged to abide by the AU Constitutive Act, which affirms the independence of its member states.

The Union's Constitutive Act emphasizes the imperative to uphold the sovereignty and geographical integrity of each state, as well as its inherent right to exist independently. Accordingly, all member nations are equally sovereign, and there should be no intervention in the internal affairs of states.

What are the critical factors regarding the Westphalian sovereignty system?

I hold a dissenting stance regarding the Westphalian sovereignty system adhered to by African governments. The Westphalian system, commonly referred to as Westphalian sovereignty, is a fundamental concept in international law that asserts the absolute sovereignty of each state over its own territory.

However, it is crucial that we acknowledge and uphold the indigenous African perspective on sovereignty, which challenges the Westphalian sovereignty system and questions the legitimacy of colonial territorial authority. Honoring and adhering to the principles outlined in the Constitutive Act becomes imperative and crucial in this context.

African nationalism encompasses an ideology, cultural expression, and social movement that centers around the concept of the nation. It underscores the unity of a certain nation. Nationalism is an ideology that asserts the nation, as defined by the theory of popular sovereignty, represents "the people." It is fundamentally rooted in advocating for one's own nation.

In my view, lacking a strong balance of power in conceptualizing Africa's sovereignty has played a role in its inability to achieve development.

Sovereignty is a controversial political term, as evident when contrasting Westphalian sovereignty with indigenous African views on sovereignty.

Westphalian sovereignty refers to the state's supreme political power and is an established legal foundation in international law. Conversely, indigenous African perspectives define a more relational type of self-determination and have only lately gained the attention of international organizations and Indigenous knowledge advocates.

Why have the AU and IGAD remained silent on this matter?

The AU and IGAD have not expressed any stance regarding the MOU for sea access. Regrettably, no African state sought the advice of the Union or RECs on economic and political matters involving neighboring countries. Fortunately, neither entity exhibits urgency in establishing clear positions. Both entities may be unaware of their very reasons for establishment and the rights and obligations that govern them.

Undoubtedly, both the AU and IGAD were informed of the signing ceremony of the MOU, just like all of us in the media. As we know, they lack an intelligence division that monitors member states' activities and takes appropriate measures. These entities are only crucial when conflicts erupt and escalate beyond control.

Is the accord truly historic or a game-changer?

I have come across reports in both Ethiopian and Somaliland media where certain individuals, referred to as "intellectuals," described the accord as both "historic" and a "game-changer." In my view, the agreement was more aptly deemed as both a "gear-breaker" and "unhistorical" as it triggers unnecessary provocation with Somali peoples in Mogadishu and eventually in Hargeisa.

There are two fundamental political arguments that explain why Somaliland currently requires this agreement with urgency. Primarily, its objective is to obtain international recognition as a sovereign nation beginning with acknowledgment from the UN and subsequently the AU. Consequently, they are inclined to support Ethiopia's strong desire for sea access and in turn acknowledge Somaliland's sovereignty.

Secondly, they are ensuring the provision of military security to prevent any aggression from Mogadishu. Regarding this matter, the economic advantages are of lesser importance.

Ethiopia has significant potential to gain access to the sea through various means beyond a distance of 20 km. The sole prerequisite is internal tranquility and amicable relations with surrounding countries. Neighboring states such as Eritrea have a coastline spanning over 1000 km, Somalia has a coastline of 3300 km, and Djibouti has a coastline of 230 kilometers. Ethiopia possesses the capacity to effectively exploit and jointly develop almost 4,600 km of coastline in a cooperative fashion.

As someone who has spent over a decade researching African unification through an indigenous governance model, I can attest there are numerous viable alternatives for gaining sea access. Lacking a participatory approach to development will result in more detrimental

consequences than beneficial ones, unfortunately. Most African leaders advocate a top-down strategy without consulting their constituents or, at bare minimum, concerned citizens.

The African unification endeavor has continually been impeded by governments' inert and reactive stances, resulting in a lack of progress. Otherwise, landlocked African countries may have been supplied access to the sea currently enjoyed by those who obtained it through colonial demarcations.

Political integration refers to the gradual establishment of a political community wherein a group of individuals acknowledge shared responsibilities and a sense of common interests. One form of political integration is interconnected with organizational frameworks of military forces, law enforcement agencies, financial resources, and communication systems in two distinct ways.

The political integration of plural societies cannot be predicated on the social and economic integration of its cultural segments; instead, political integration is a precondition for social and economic integration. The lack of unwavering dedication to political integration projects renders ineffective social and economic integration initiatives pursued by different postcolonial African leaders.

How secessionist movements hinder Africa's progress

Secessionism in Africa is a multifaceted political phenomenon. Secession advocates often appeal to the principle of self-determination, while the basis for their claims typically stems from political grievances, feelings of marginalization, historical narratives, and economic motives. Secessionist groups have emerged throughout Africa since decolonization peaked in the 1960s and 1970s.

Englebert's analysis reveals that out of the 26 separatist movements in postcolonial Africa, only Eritrea and South Sudan successfully fulfilled their objectives. The renowned movements, including Biafra, Darfur, Monbasa, Southern Cameroons, and Azawad, have yet to achieve success.

Western Sahara and Somaliland remain in uncertain states. However, it's worth noting Western Sahara has been acknowledged by the African Union.

Ethiopia now has the highest number of separatist movements per nation, including the Oromo Liberation Front, Tigray People's Liberation Front, Ogaden, and Sidama Movement. As a consequence, Ethiopia ought to approach any secessionist movement with prudence, as the negative repercussions are more severe than ever before. Postcolonial African leaders have

always condemned separatist movements, recognizing that internal divisions diminish our viability economically and otherwise.

The Federal Government of Somalia aims to develop a robust governmental structure that is both sustainable and advantageous for the Somali people. The Somali people have experienced profound distress over the past four decades. I firmly believe that the Ethiopian government has provided significant assistance for the constructive progress of the Somali administration in Mogadishu. However, there are still numerous opportunities for these two nations to collaborate significantly in various fields.

I fought alongside the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/SPLM) for equality and human dignity in mid-1996-97. However, my intention as an individual and collective was not promoting an independent South Sudan. Nevertheless, South Sudan is born but, as per my original belief, remains a fragile weak state. I do not believe that small and fragile states are the solution for a greater Pan-African vision of a United People of Africa (UPA).

Advice to Somalia and its leadership

Political and diplomatic developments and challenges at hand necessitate a comprehensive analysis to arrive at a mutually agreeable resolution. In my opinion, Somalia should address Somaliland's aspiration for self-determination more thoughtfully. In the absence of an alternative solution, both parties will be unable to maintain their stalemate.

Establishing a permanent resolution for claims made by Somaliland would present a pivotal moment for diplomatic and political deliberation. This will dictate whether or not the regional administration will enter into a cooperative agreement with a particular party.

Ethiopia's request for maritime access is a valid and inherent concern. It has historical, political, economic, psychological, and philosophical foundations. However, the request ought to be executed in collaboration with all involved parties and in accordance with a win-win approach for the regional community.

A rhetoric that escalates the agreement into a conflict will not be advantageous to any of the involved parties. In these matters, Ethiopia and Somalia have endured sufficient suffering and experience to not tolerate any more anguish. Thus, resolving the matter through sub-regional and regional mechanisms is in everyone's best interest.

Perpetuating this notion, I would like to emphasize that Somalia's recent political development concerning accession to the East African Community constitutes a zero-sum game in the formation of African regional blocs. I reiterate to regional political leaders that some African

nations want to join robust regional communities, while others establish or improve those that already exist.

Advice to the Ethiopian government

Foreign policy and diplomacy are derivatives of internal fortitude. Ethiopians are currently experiencing a dearth of serenity and tranquility in all areas due to the dominance of Eurocentric language and ethnic-based federalism, together with the influence of identity politics. Currently, we are unable to access some parts of the country, let alone Berbera.

I personally share the country's frustrations and ambitions. We all advocate for the reintegration of Africa and access to the sea for landlocked nations. Nevertheless, each mile commences with an initial stride. There are preceding stages that contribute to our ultimate objective.

Sharing any strategic public enterprise or infrastructure is not recommended. However, if required for any bargaining stance, a referendum and public involvement are necessary. Tear the recent agreement apart and let us collectively claim 4,600 km of coastline in a cooperative manner.

Understanding that the authority of the state is derived from the will of the people and can only be exercised in accordance with that will is fundamental to achieving the renaissance that will catapult Africa into the international stage. As a consequence, the determination of what constitutes the public welfare is the prerogative and duty of the people, not the state.

The assertion that the authority of the state originates from the will of the people is, in essence, foundational to this principle. Created by the people to carry out their will, the State should ideally function as an instrument of the people. This constitutes a misuse of the coercive power of the state when the conduct of state officials reveals an underlying conviction that their positions bestow upon them superior knowledge and the authority to dictate the conduct of others according to their own conception of the public interest.

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