

## The Security Issue behind the Ethiopian Involvement in Somalia<sup>1</sup>

Elsa González  
Grupo de Estudios Africanos  
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid  
[elsa.gonzalez@uam.es](mailto:elsa.gonzalez@uam.es)

### 1) Introduction

Between December 2006 and January 2009, Ethiopian troops were deployed in Somalia's territory; the justification for this operation, given by the Ethiopian government, was the fight against terrorism, in order to face the Jihad declared by the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) towards Ethiopia in 2006. This official discourse has been accompanied at the same time by the idea that the US have backed and sponsored this military deployment, giving it a broader dimension, not just regional but international.

Nevertheless, different factors suggest that it may be necessary to look farther to understand the Ethiopian operation in its neighbour country; among others we can point first, that the connections with international terrorist networks are not self evident<sup>2</sup> (and in consequence the importance of the threat might have been overstated); second, that the result of the intervention has not put an end to radicalism<sup>3</sup>; and third, that the assumed involvement of multiple actors (not only Ethiopians and Somalis but also Eritreans, US, secessionist movements inside Ethiopia<sup>4</sup>, and Al-Qaeda among others) suggests a more complex scenario than the one traced by official discourse of the fight against terrorism.

Given the implication of multiple actors in the conflict in Somalia whose interests affect the Ethiopian politics, and the delicate local and international context, the aim of this work is to understand how different political issues and areas intertwined in the decision and realisation of the operation. The main hypothesis is that what was at stake was not (only) the self-defense of the Ethiopian state from an external threat, as much as the authority and legitimacy of the Ethiopian government and its state model in the local and international political arenas.

The two main questions that articulate this research are why Ethiopia engaged in a military operation in Somalia at the end of 2006 and how it has affected to the Ethiopian state. In order to present the research and the preliminary approach, I will briefly introduce the current literature on the topic and briefly explain the official reasons given by the

---

<sup>1</sup> Preliminary version. Please, do not quote without prior consent as this is a work in progress. All comments are welcome.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. MARCHAL, Roland, "Warlordism and terrorism: how to obscure an already confusing crisis? The case of Somalia" en *International Affairs* vol. 83, nº 6, pp. 1091-1106. "While Ethiopia justified its intervention in Somalia by reference to the hundreds of foreign jihadists who it claimed were threatening its territory, the reality that emerged after January 2007 was more modest. Not only were the Courts so quickly defeated that it became difficult to believe that they ever posed a serious threat, but most of the foreign passport-holders arrested by the Ethiopian army happened to be of Somali or Ethiopian origin. Very few truly foreign prisoners could be considered valuable assets in the 'war on terror' in terms of their connections to genuine terrorist networks: should a new war be started in Somalia for such a low stake?" p. 1105

<sup>3</sup> MENKHAUS, Ken, *Somalia after the Ethiopian occupation. First steps to end the conflict and combat extremism*, Enough Strategy Paper, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Specially the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).

Ethiopian government. Then I will expose why a broader lecture, in time and space, might help to see other causes and effects of the intervention.

In this paper I present the preliminary findings of my research on the Ethiopian intervention in Somalia. This work is part of the research project “Monitoring Conflicts in Horn of Africa” of the Centro de Estudos Africanos (CEA-ISCTE) of Lisbon.<sup>5</sup> A first fieldwork has already been realized in Addis Abeba from the 20<sup>th</sup> of November to the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 2010. It was the opportunity to do the press review of the pro-government newspaper *Ethiopian Herald* for the years 2006 and 2007 in order to follow the official justification<sup>6</sup>; it was the occasion as well to collect documents of international organizations (namely AU, EU, IGAD), while I continued working on secondary sources (among others, some of the articles cited in the bibliography).

Nevertheless, the main work was focused on realizing interviews to researchers and representative of public and private institutions (Addis Abeba University, Institute for Security Studies, French and Spanish Embassies, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UE delegation to the AU and other researchers, etc.) with who I had unstructured interviews. During those meetings the main questions were directed towards gathering data about the explicit and tacit motivations for the deployment, the political context, the role and interests of the actors involved, the evaluation in historical perspective and the consequences from the Ethiopian prism. This paper is the product of a work in progress and as such, its aim is to expose the preliminary findings and to receive feedback with a view to continuing the research.

## 2) Current understandings around the intervention

In October 2004, in the framework of the Eldoret Peace Process, the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia (TFG) was established and Abdillahi Yusuf (a former colonel of the Siyad Barre regime, leader of one of the rebel groups that fought against Barre’s regime, and one of Somalia’s warlords and leader of Puntland) was designed as the President of Somalia. This government was identified as an ally of Ethiopia, and this has been pointed as one of its main weaknesses in the eyes of the Somali population; it was understood that the TFG was dependent on foreign support, not only of the US or the EU, but of Ethiopia as well, as its openly admitted good relation showed<sup>7</sup>.

When in 2006 the UIC gained force and presence in the country, especially since June when they managed to obtain the control of Mogadiscio, Ethiopia saw the lost of its ally as a dangerous situation. The takeover of the country by the UIC was perceived by the Meles Zenawi’s regime as a threat to the integrity of the Ethiopian state and population. Different factors may explain this perception: the UIC “Greater Somalia” discourse and their pretensions on the Ethiopian region 5, whose stability was already troubled, among

---

<sup>5</sup> This project (reference PTDC/AFR/100460/2008) is funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology dependent on the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education.

<sup>6</sup> The decision to do the press review of this newspaper is due in part to a language limitation in this research, not being able to follow the amharic ones. Nevertheless, this publication is oriented to Anglophone readers, and as such it is commonly understood as a communication tool oriented to the expatriate and international community.

<sup>7</sup> *Ethiopian Herald*: “Meles holds talks with Somali TNG President”, 15-01-2006, p. 1; “Somalia reopens embassy in Addis Ababa”, 05-04-2006, p. 1; “Ethio-Somalia bilateral ties growing”, 09-05-2006, p.1.

other factors, by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) claims for independence<sup>8</sup>; the hosting of the Oromo Liberation front (OLF) by extremist movements in Somalia in order to sum another destabilizing factor for Ethiopia; the fear of attacks in other parts of the Ethiopian territory (as a reminiscence of the bombings in 1996 and 1997 in public buildings such as the Ghion hotel, claimed by al-itiihad, then lead by Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys who in 2006 was one of the leaders of the UIC); and the Eritrean connection with the UIC and rebel movements, documented in the November 2006 Report of the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia<sup>9</sup>.

Although it is difficult to disentangle all these issues, it is possible to subsume them in two types of threat: a local or national one, with the problem of the opposition movements towards the Addis Abeba regime and rule; and a regional one, with the UIC and Eritrea mutual support (with even, supposedly, Lybia, Egypt and Saudi Arabia and other countries implication). The Ethiopian fear seemed even more justified when in mid 2006 the UIC declared a Jihad against Ethiopia. This has been the main justification for the Ethiopian government for deploying its troops in Somalia. Previously, at least since 1997, Ethiopia had been realizing —although denying it— incursions in Somalia, but this time the UIC gave a pretext to the Ethiopian troops to massively and officially cross the border. The operation that officially started the 24<sup>th</sup> of December 2006 was presented from the Ethiopian side as an act of self-defense<sup>10</sup> under the international law. But as Awol K. Allo has explained, confronting the Ethiopian arguments with the UN Charter and especially its article 51, “although Ethiopia could be seen to be under an imminent threat of attack triggering the right of recourse to a proportionate response, it certainly went beyond what is necessary to remove the threat and used a disproportionate force”.<sup>11</sup>

The Ethiopian Government always defended the idea of the legitimate defense, in the framework of the international normative system, the main argument being the protection of the integrity and sovereignty of Ethiopia’s territory<sup>12</sup>. This is why the official discourse prefers to talk about an “operation” rather than an “intervention” or an “incursion”; but as the Ethiopian officials have termed it in different occasions, the operation can even be understood as a war. It has been legitimized officially in the framework of the international law in two ways; on the one hand, as an act of self defense, and on the other hand, as following the invitation made by the TFG to enter troops in Somalia and combat the UIC (even though the legality of the intervention might be questioned by the doubtful legitimacy of the TFG government itself and the problems Somalia is facing as a state).<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. HAGMANN, Tobias, “The political roots of the current crisis in region 5”, SSRC, 21 September 2007, <http://hornofafrica.ssrc.org/Hagmann/printable.html> [consulted 24 April 2011].

<sup>9</sup> UN Monitoring Group on Somalia, “Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1676 (2006)”, S/2006/913, 22 November 2006.

<sup>10</sup> *Ethiopian Herald*: “We’re not saying we might be attacked. We’re saying we’ve been already attacked – Prime Minister Meles Zenawi”, 28-11-2006, ps. 3 and 10; “Forced to go to war: Premier”, 26-12-2006, pp. 1 and 9. It has been noted that the Ethiopian troops started to deploy after the UN resolution 1725 (2006) authorising IGASOM; cf. FANTA, Emmanuel, “Analysis: Ethiopian intervention in Somalia”, 30 January 2007, in <http://www.bloggernews.net/14238> [consulted the 24th of April 2011].

<sup>11</sup> AWOL K. ALLO, “Ethiopia’s armed intervention in Somalia: the legality of self-defense in response to the threat of terrorism” in *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy*, vol. 29, n° 1, 2010, p. 167.

<sup>12</sup> *Ethiopian Herald*: “War with UIC extremists: War of defending national sovereignty”, 28-12-1006, p. 6; “Our agenda is to provide adequate protection to our country – Prime Minster Meles Zenawi”, 29-12-2006, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> AWOL KASSIM ALLO, “Counter-intervention, invitation, both, or neither? An appraisal of the 2006 Ethiopian Military Intervention in Somalia” in *Mizan Law Review*, vol. 3, n° 2, 2009, pp. 201-239.

It is said that the operation was intended to last two weeks, but it took two years, up to January 2009 when finally the Ethiopian left Somalia. Although it is recognized that the Ethiopians effectively managed to crush the UIC within less than one month (showing that the threat was probably overstated)<sup>14</sup>, the principal reason that was given for prolonging the intervention was the impossibility to ensure a real control of the territory by the TFG and to fill the vacuum created by the departure of Ethiopian troops. It is probably true that Ethiopia was entrapped<sup>15</sup>, and apparently they did not even have an exit plan.

The two main factors that help to explain the withdrawal of the troops are, on the one hand, the peace process started in 2008 between TFG and UIC, and conditioned by the later on the end of the Ethiopian presence in Somalia's territory, and on the other hand the creation and slow deployment of the AMISOM "peacekeeping" force; but, as it is hard to believe that top decision makers, even if they did not have an exit option, were not aware that the logic ensuing scenario once the UIC was defeated could be to be caught in Somalia's quagmire, other reasons were likely present in the decision to deploy the troops.

It is frequent to read in academic texts and hear in the media that this intervention was realized with the support of the United States, but the type of support provided by the Americans is far from being clear and even recognized by both parts. This question of the US involvement is not easy to elucidate, as it is neither easy to know how many soldiers were effectively deployed during the different phases of the intervention, or how many casualties there were.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the political decision process around the issue has been characterized by its secrecy, the Parliament being consulted in November/December 2006 just to approve the measure; although some deputies of the opposition tried to question the validity of engaging militarily in Ethiopia, they had no capacity to impede the resolution<sup>17</sup>.

The Ethiopian government has claimed it received no foreign support<sup>18</sup>, although the press review of the main government journal, the *Ethiopian Herald*, for 2006 and 2007 helps to understand why the idea that the US were behind the intervention is so widespread. More concretely, the government seems to have played with this ambiguity, showing a strong support by the international society towards the decision to intervene in Somalia, and at the same exposing the renewal and increase of foreign aid flows. Moreover, although the Ethiopian intervention in Somalia is frequently associated to a US sponsorship, or even direction, no clear evidence has been made public for the moment. This does not mean that the US had no knowledge of the Ethiopian decision to intervene but it seems worth not to overstate the American factor in the intervention. As Menkhaus puts it: "Though the Ethiopian offensive was not, as has sometimes been falsely portrayed,

---

<sup>14</sup> And even only in one week as stated by Meles Zenawi; *Ethiopian Herald*: "Union of Islamic Courts has simply melted away – Primer Minister Meles Zenawi", 30-12-2006, pp. 3 and 10; see as well *Ethiopian Herald*: "The Six-Day war. Ethiopia's successful military operation against Somali extremists", 31-12-2006, p. 3. One month after the beginning of the operation, it was said that the Ethiopian troops had begun their withdrawal: *Ethiopian Herald*: "Ethiopian troops begin Somali withdrawal, says ministry", 24-01-2007, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> "Having intervened, however, the Ethiopian army then found itself (like Western militaries in Iraq and Afghanistan) in the classic tar-baby dilemma, where every attempt to attack the problem led to its being still more firmly stuck to it." Cf. CLAPHAM, Christopher, "Post-war Ethiopia: The Trajectories of Crisis" in *Review of African Political Economy*, n° 120, 2009, p. 190.

<sup>16</sup> It is said that at the beginning 20.000 soldiers were sent to Somalia (14% of the regular troops), and that at the end there were around 6000. There is no given number of casualties.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Ethiopian Herald*: "Parliament endorses resolution to reverse Somali Islamists aggression", 01-12-2006, p. 1; AWOL K. ALLO, "Ethiopia's armed intervention in Somalia..." *op.cit.*, ps. 154-155.

<sup>18</sup> *Ethiopian Herald*: "We have never expected any country to back us; neither we asked any one to do so – P.M. Meles", 03-01-2007, p. 3.

an instance of the US subcontracting the war of terror to a regional ally (Ethiopia pursued its own interests and would have acted with or without US approval), the US did provide diplomatic, intelligence, and possibly other support to the Ethiopian government in this operation...”<sup>19</sup>

Although the interests of Ethiopia and the United States seemed to converge, it appears that the Americans were aware of the difficult consequences that engaging directly or supporting overtly the Ethiopians could suppose.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the American concern in Somalia was, and still is, clearly linked to the Global War on Terror, and their main concern was the position of the different actors towards terrorists movements. But Ethiopian interests seemed quite more complex, concerned by national security issues going beyond the terrorist threat.

The Ethiopian operation in Somalia involved multiple actors. It was not just an act of self-defense of the Ethiopian state by the threat posed by Somali non-state actors following an invitation of the TFG. Regional actors were involved, as the Eritrean supporting al-shabaab, and the Ugandan and Burundi providing troops for AMISOM; local actors as well as Oromo Liberation Front, based in Somalia and struggling for a real autonomy of the Oromia region, and Ogaden National Liberation Front fighting for the independence of the Somali region; and international actors, although in different manners, such as the United States, and International Organizations, especially the African Union. The ambiguities around the operation induce to think that what was at stake in 2006 was more than the defeat of the UIC, especially if we take into account the troubled situation of the Ethiopian politics since 2005.

### 3) Alternative insights into the Ethiopian operation

The Ethiopian incursion in Somalia territory started one year and a half after the controversial national and regional elections of May (and August) 2005<sup>21</sup>. This electoral process produced a “crisis of governance” that can be related to the “expression of much deeper problems that derive from the inherent contradictions of state creation and maintenance in a perennially violent corner of Africa”.<sup>22</sup> The elections five years ago put in question the legitimacy of the government and of the model of state it is implementing, for some local and international actors.

---

<sup>19</sup> MENKHAUS, Ken, “Violent Islamic Extremism: Al-Shabaab Recruitment in America”, Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs of the United States Senate, March 11 2009, p. 3. It is said that Wikileaks Cables reveal the contrary, that Ethiopia went to Somalia prompted by the United State, but until the documents are made public it is hard to be certain that Ethiopia was just a puppet. But even if the decision was taken by the Americans and directed by them, it is necessary to ask what benefits the Ethiopian were looking for. Cf. AXE, David, “WikiLeaked cable confirms US secret Somalia operation” 2 December 2010, <http://addisvoice.com/2010/12/wikileaks-cable-confirms-us-secret-somalia-operation/> [consulted 12 February 2011]; PRINCE, Rob, “WikiLeaks Reveals U.S. Twisted Ethiopia's Arm to Invade Somalia” in <http://www.blackagendareport.com/?q=content/wikileaks-reveals-us-twisted-ethiopia-arm-invade-somalia>, 21 December 2010, [consulted 12 February 2011].

<sup>20</sup> At least this is what can be deemed from the document “Somalia: Expanding Crisis in the Horn of Africa”, Joint Hearing before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations and the Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation of The Committee on International Relations House of Representatives, June 29, 2006, Serial n° 109–201.

<sup>21</sup> In Somali region the elections took place in August because of logistical and infrastructural problems.

<sup>22</sup> CLAPHAM, Christopher, “Post-war Ethiopia...” *op.cit.* p. 181.

Engaging in Somalia was a hazardous enterprise, as showed by the fact that Ethiopia finally stayed in Somalia two years. It seems convenient to adopt a broader approach in contrast with the one offered not only by the official discourse but by current research as well. Most of the works that have tackled the question of the Ethiopian intervention have done so working on the conflict in Somalia. Moreover, although some articles have dealt with this issue from the Ethiopian side, pointing the necessity “to look back at the context in which the military intervention occurred in order to understand better the Ethiopian strategy”<sup>23</sup>, still some aspects appear to be absent in the usual explanations. Given the multiple actors involved and the complexity of the scenario, it is necessary to enlarge the understanding from the spatial point of view, and to broaden the temporal framework to take into account their different trajectories.

As Kjetil Tronvoll has done in his work on the Ethiopian democratization process<sup>24</sup> attending to its different times and phases, instead of focusing exclusively in the electoral process, the intervention should be understood in a similar vein not limiting the comprehension only to its development since December 2006 to January 2009. It is the contention of this work that the Ethiopian intervention in Somalia has to be understood as a demonstration of force by a government who felt his base was being shackled in 2005, not just the local base but the international as well. For these reason, for the moment the research focuses on the background of the 2005 elections and its political consequences for the EPRDF regime, although the aim the longer term is to analyse it in a broader historical perspective, to situate it in a larger political context.

The elections that took place five years ago have been highly controversial. While the openness of the pre-election period and the electoral day has been recognized —at least in the urban areas— and is visible in the backlash the government experienced from the voters, the post-electoral developments showed a high level of authoritarianism.<sup>25</sup> The demonstrations that took place in Addis Abeba in June and November, that ended with the death of demonstrators shot by the police, numerous arrests and the imprisonment of the most notorious members of the main party in the opposition (the Coalition for Unity and Democracy – CUD), journalists and social activists, exposed the ferocity of the Meles Zenawi’s regime and its fear to lose power.<sup>26</sup>

The violent reaction of the Ethiopian government supposed in a first moment a drawback of the legitimacy of the Ethiopian regime in the eyes of the main donors of the international society. Nevertheless, if at first those threatened Ethiopia with cutting the aid on which the Ethiopian budget is heavily dependent, as the opposition was asking, this

---

<sup>23</sup> FANTA, Emmanuel, “Analysis: Ethiopian intervention in Somalia” op. cit.; BAMFO, Napoleon A., “Ethiopia’s invasion of Somalia in 2006: Motives and lessons learned” in *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, vol. 4, n° 2, ps. 55-65, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> TRONVOLL, Kjetil, “Ambiguous elections: the influence of non-electoral politics in Ethiopian democratisation” in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 47, n°3, 2009, pp. 449–474.

<sup>25</sup> The European Observation Mission stated that “the high level of participation by the Ethiopian people and the opening of public debate prior to election day marked a significant development towards democracy in Ethiopia”, although as René Lefort has pointed, this may have been the case mainly in the urban zones and not in the rural areas. Cf. EU Election Observation Mission in Ethiopia, *Final Report on the Legislative Elections*, 2005, p. 5, and LEFORT, René, “Powers —*mengist*— and peasants in rural Ethiopia: the May 2005 elections” in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 45, n° 2, 2007, pp. 253–273. For an assessment of the Ethiopian authoritarianism shown in the 2005 elections, cf. ABBINK, Jon, “Discomfiture of democracy? The 2005 election crisis in Ethiopia and its aftermath” in *African Affairs*, vol. 105, n° 419, 2006, ps. 173–199.

<sup>26</sup> LYONS, Terrence, *Ethiopia: Implications of the May 2005 Elections for Future Democratization Programs*, IFES Document, August 2005, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, *Ethiopia. Prisoners of conscience on trial for treason: opposition party leaders, human rights defenders and journalists*, AFR 25/013/2006, May 2006, p. 4.

threat did not finally materialize.<sup>27</sup> On the contrary, and as has been exposed in the *Ethiopian Herald*, embassies finally renewed their support, foreign governments kept funding the main development projects and, as is the case of Spain, even consolidated their relation raising substantially the level of the cooperation. As I was told, the Electoral Observation Mission of the European Union said what different European governments did not wanted to say, avoiding this way to be tied by their statements.

Since 2005 the EPRDF has work hard to recover its control over the country. The executive has shown a strong control of the judiciary system in relation, for example, with the imprisonment of the main opposition politicians (especially of the CUD), journalists and other social activists, most of them finally released in 2007. But as it was visible in the 2010 elections, the five years between both elections were fatal for the opposition who failed absolutely to maintain the coalition. This is probably one of the effects of three very restrictive laws passed in the meantime, showing a strong tightening of the political space: the press law in 2008, and the charities act and the antiterrorist law of 2009. This laws have narrowed the democratic space and civil liberties, increasing the fear and suspicion of the Ethiopian population, and allowing a much control of foreign economic fluxes coming from the international cooperation. The result has been a more severe state and government.

Anyhow, the electoral process of 2005 can be better understood following Tronvoll, in the light of the precedent one in 2000 and of the social impact of the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean war. “The 2005 election thus follows in the same path as the previous ones, as they ‘revealed major constraints in Ethiopia’s political system, underlining that after the regimes of Emperor Haile Sellassie (1930–74) and the military leader Mengistu (1974–91), centralist authoritarianism is not gone but perhaps is being reinvented in a new form’.”<sup>28</sup> As the 2000 elections had been a clear demonstration of the non democratic character of the EPRDF regime<sup>29</sup>, so have been the 2005 ones, and even more the 2010 ones. At the same time, maybe it is not too adventurous to say that, as the Ethio-Eritrean war of 2000 was used to awake state nationalism in the elections one decade ago, the intervention in Somalia has been used in the same vein. But at the same time, this might be a miscalculation in longer perspective; the late Ethio-Eritrean war aggravated the electorate frustration and awoke the national identity represented in 2005 in the CUD in detriment of the ethnic ones. Although the last elections shown that the EPRDF has succeeded in regaining control, other the consequences of the intervention are still to be felt.

With the ambiguous federalism the Ethiopian government is implementing, with a Constitution that recognises on the paper the right to secede, but with a control *de facto* of all the regions with a network of affiliated regional-ethnic parties, the EPRDF has managed to control with successive political parties the elections in the Somali region. Especially since 1998 the Somali People’s Democratic Party (SPDP) affiliated to EPRDF has been governing the region, and accused by its detractors of being and incarnation of the Addis Abeba colonialism in the Ogaden. This lecture of the inclusion of the Ogaden in Ethiopia has its detractors, but it shows in a certain way that the construction of the Ethiopian state

<sup>27</sup> MAMMO MUCHIE, “Ethiopia. Another view” in *New African*, January 2006, pp. 32-33; Yohannes Woldemariam, “Ethiopia’s Zenawi Exploits the “War onTerror” ”, in *Sudan Tribune*, 26 of November 2005, accessible at <http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/issues/ethiopia/2005/1126terror.htm>, accessed the 15th of May 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. TRONVOLL, Kjetil, “Ambiguous elections...” *op. cit.*, p. 464.

<sup>29</sup> For an analysis by different members of the Elections Observation Mission of 2000, see PAUSEWANG, Siegfried; TRONVOLL, Kjetil and AALEN, Lovise (eds.), *Ethiopia since the Derg. A decade of democratic performance and pretension*, Zed Books, London, 2002.

(as any other) is still going on, and is related to the colonial period, when the expansion of the Ethiopian state and the definition of its present borders took place.<sup>30</sup>

It seems plausible then to enquire into the motives for the operation, which appear to go beyond the terrorist threat, as it can be deduced from the fact that the operation in Somalia implied different simultaneous battle fronts that have existed all the lifetime of the EPRDF regime, especially against Eritrea and armed opposition movements contesting the predominance of Addis Abeba in their regions (ONLF, OLF). All were labelled as “terrorists”, but this strategy blurs the different political aims each one of them support and their different trajectories, that can be traced back to the XXth Century and related to the politics led by the Meles Zenawi’s regime.

Regarding the front against Somalia’s extremists groups, the intervention could gain being analyzed taking into account the two previous Ethio-Somali wars, in 1964 under Haile Selassie and in 1977-1978 during the Derg regime. This is a work that remains to be done, but the historical perspective could be particularly pertinent in order to understand how the border between the two countries is still a controversial issue. Maybe the intervention can be understood as the third Ethio-Somalia war, but this time it is more than a bilateral confrontation. The complexity that surrounds the Ethiopian operation in Somalia seems to imply that the Horn of Africa has stopped being a “proto Regional Security Complex”, as Barry Buzan and Ole Waever considered it after the nineties.<sup>31</sup> For this reason, and following the way Christopher Clapham analyse the maintenance of the Meles Zenawi regime<sup>32</sup>, it seems important to understand how the local, regional and international political arenas overlap.

In addition to the reassertion of the Ethiopian government on the state level pointed earlier, the intervention served to reassert the presence and control of the government in the country and more specifically in the Somali Regional State. Politics in this region, have been a problem for the EPRDF since the end of the Derg, since the ONLF never joined the coalition, defending the absolute secession of the Ogaden. But the intervention has served as well to combat the Oromo irredentism. The OLF has been as well involved in this scenario because it is based in Somali and Kenyan areas, and backed as the ONLF by Eritrea and the UIC. As Lyons put it: “To Ethiopia, the potential that these threats would increase over time –rather than the ideology of the Islamic Courts, their irredentist claims, or their ties to al-Qaeda– compelled a response. Ethiopia acted preemptively by providing the military might to drive the UIC out of Mogadishu, to end the safe havens offered Ethiopia’s enemies, and to bring the TFG to power in the Somali capital.”<sup>33</sup> This links between Eritrea, ONLF, OLF and the Somalia conflicts have been acknowledged by the UN Monitoring Group as well.

---

<sup>30</sup> For different accounts on what is going on in Somali Region cf. ABDI ISMAIL SAMATAR, “Ethiopian federalism: autonomy versus control in the Somali Region” in *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 25, 2004, n° 6, pp. 1131–1154; HAGMANN, Tobias y KHALIF, Mohamud H., “State and Politics in Ethiopia’s Somali Region since 1991” in *Bildbaan*, vol. 6; HAGMANN, Tobias, “Beyond clannishness and colonialism: understanding political disorder in Ethiopia’s Somali Region, 1991-2004” in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 43, n° 4, 2005, pp. 509–536.

<sup>31</sup> BUZAN, Barry and WÆVER, Ole, *Regions and powers. The structure of international security*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003; cf. specially chapter 8 “Subsaharan Africa: security dynamics in a setting of weak and failed states” pp. 219-253.

<sup>32</sup> CLAPHAM, Christopher, “Post-war Ethiopia...” *op.cit*

<sup>33</sup> LYONS, Terrence, “The Ethiopia-Eritrea Conflict and the Search for Peace in the Horn of Africa” in *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 36, n° 120, 2009, p. 174.

The regional level of the intervention goes beyond its bilateral appearance. The operation was a confrontation between Ethiopia and non state Somali actors in support by the former of the Transitional Federal Government. The Union of Islamic Courts was apparently defeated very quickly, but the reason why Ethiopia stayed longer has not probably to do simply with the fact that they had not an exit plan (which is something that seems to be accepted by different analysts) or that they were invited to stay longer by the TFG; it seems quite logical that for Ethiopia it was the occasion to clean up the backyard and to reassert itself as the core country in the Horn of Africa. In this sense, it is possible to say that the Ethiopian operation in Somalia was a proxy war with Eritrea.

Ethiopia has gained at the same something of vital importance: the opportunity to use the intervention to represent the key to the stability of the Horn of Africa taking advantage of the political contrast with its two neighbours: Eritrea and Somalia. This is not to downgrade the real preoccupation with different irredentists groups in Somalia threatening Ethiopia. Ethiopia tried between June and October 2006 to bring to the same table the TFG and UIC, and to negotiate with the UIC; when it became clear that they were not reaching any common view, Ethiopia resorted to the military solution. But it is true at the same time that the capacity of al-itiihad and al-shabaab to do a real damage to Ethiopia in its own territory may well have been overstated. In consequence, in the broader international level, it served to reassert itself as one of the main African actors in the international society and as deserving to host the headquarters of the African Union. The preoccupation with justifying in terms of the international law the presence of Ethiopian troops in Somalia can be interpreted in this sense.

In the light of this complex scenario, it seems prudent not to overstate the implication of the United States; none of the people I have had the opportunity to interview assumed that this link was clear and evident, for two main reasons: first, because in military terms, the Ethiopian state is strong enough for handling by itself the costs of the deployment (especially in terms of troops and ammunition) and second, because the United States were too afraid of getting tightly involved in one more war. The only support that might have been given is via intelligence information, and apparently the US bombings while the Ethiopian presence in Somalia were done without prior communication to Ethiopia.

Finally, this issue situated Ethiopia on an equal plan with other states threatened by radicals and this way contributed to reinforce the presence of the country in the International Society, participating in the Global War on Terror. If the Horn of Africa is a strategic region is a matter of perception differing from one interlocutor to another, but there is always a great fear of what could happen in the future. This may be the main reason why the flux of foreign aid keeps flowing towards Ethiopia.<sup>34</sup> Ethiopian managed not only to maintain but even to strengthen its international presence as it can be seen from the presence of Meles Zenawi in all the main international forums such as the Gleeneagles Summit or The Commission for Africa. Similarly, the way Ethiopia has underlined the legality of the operation has mainly to do with the importance attributed to the international norms as a source of legitimacy, and especially in the continent as a factor of stability for the African states.

---

<sup>34</sup> In 2006, it is said Ethiopia was receiving 1,9 billion dollars per year that represented 25% of the GNP. LEFORT, René, "Impasse en Éthiopie" in *Géopolitique Africaine*, n° 21, January 2006, pp. 17-26.

#### 4) Summing up

In the aftermath of the 2005 elections, the Ethiopian government felt its basement was tumbling down. The way the CUD manage to mobilize the electorate was interpreted as a questioning of the federal model of state, and showed the real possibility of losing power if a genuine democratization process was undergone. The government in Addis Abeba has been at the same time constantly questioned since its arrival by different regional movements claiming real autonomy or even independence, such as OLF and ONLF.

The unwillingness of Meles Zenawi's regime to cope with divergent political demands has been one of its characteristic features; the failure of this strategy became too apparent in 2005, especially in the eyes of the international community. Nevertheless, if we look back, it is visible that in the last five years Meles Zenawi has consolidated its position in the international and local arenas; foreign aid finally was not cut, donors praise constantly Ethiopia's stability, and the last 2010 elections fell short of being democratic.

Between the two last national and regional elections, Ethiopia realised its intervention in Somalia, and this military deployment seems to have contributed partly to boost the authority of Meles Zenawi on the international and local level, and to reduce external and internal sources of destabilization. Ethiopia has passed severe laws that show a clear process of closure to external interferences, in order to assure a greater capacity of manoeuvre for the government. In the last five years, the Ethiopian government has had a strategy of resistance to some political constraints in order to assure its independence from other political actors, precisely because some of its weaknesses were made apparent in 2005 (even though they can be traced previously to this date).

#### Bibliography

- AALEN, Lovise and TRONVOLL, Kjetil "The End of Democracy? Curtailing Political and Civil Rights in Ethiopia" in *Review of African Political Economy* vol. 36, n°120, ps. 193-207.
- ABBINK, Jon, "discomfiture of democracy? The 2005 election crisis in Ethiopia and its aftermath" in *African Affairs*, vol. 105, n° 419, ps. 173–199.
- ABDI ISMAIL SAMATAR, "Ethiopian federalism: autonomy versus control in the Somali Region" in *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 25, 2004, n° 6, pp. 1131–1154.
- AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, *Ethiopia. Prisoners of conscience on trial for treason: opposition party leaders, human rights defenders and journalists*, AFR 25/013/2006, May 2006.
- AWOL KASSIM ALLO, "Counter-intervention, invitation, both, or neither? An appraisal of the 2006 Ethiopian Military Intervention in Somalia" in *Mizan Law Review*, vol. 3, n° 2, 2009, pp. 201-239.
- AWOL K. ALLO, "Ethiopia's armed intervention in Somalia: the legality of self-defense in response to the threat of terrorism" en *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy*, vol. 29, n° 1, 1010, ps. 139-167.
- BELACHEW GEBREWOLD, "Ethiopian Nationalism: an Ideology to Transcend All Odds" in *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 44, n° 1, 2009, pp. 79-97.

- CLAPHAM, Christopher, “Post-war Ethiopia: The Trajectories of Crisis” in *Review of African Political Economy*, n° 120, 2009, pp. 181-192.
- EU Election Observation Mission in Ethiopia, *Final Report on the Legislative Elections*, 2005.
- FANTA, Emmanuel, “Analysis: Ethiopian intervention in Somalia”, 30 January 2007, in <http://www.bloggernews.net/14238> [consulted the 24th of April 2011]
- HAGMANN, Tobias, “Beyond clannishness and colonialism: understanding political disorder in Ethiopia’s Somali Region, 1991-2004” in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 43, n° 4, 2005, pp. 509–536.
- HAGMANN, Tobias, “The political roots of the current crisis in region 5”, SSRC, 21 September 2007, <http://hornofafrica.ssrc.org/Hagmann/printable.html> [consulted 24 April 2011].
- HAGMANN, Tobias y KHALIF, Mohamud H., “State and Politics in Ethiopia’s Somali Region since 1991” in *Bildbaan*, vol. 6, pp. 25-49.
- LAITIN, David D., “The War in the Ogaden: Implications for Siyaad's Role in Somali History” in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 17, n° 1, 1979, pp. 95-115.
- LEFORT, René, “Impasse en Éthiopie” in *Géopolitique Africaine*, n° 21, January 2006, pp. 17-26.
- LEFORT, René, “Powers —mengist— and peasants in rural Ethiopia: the May 2005 elections” in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 45, n° 2, 2007, pp. 253–273.
- LYONS, Terrence, *Ethiopia: Implications of the May 2005 Elections for Future Democratization Programs*, IFES Document, August 2005.
- LYONS, Terrence, “The Ethiopia-Eritrea Conflict and the Search for Peace in the Horn of Africa” in *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 36, n° 120, 2009, pp. 167-180.
- MARCHAL, Roland, “Warlordism and terrorism: how to obscure an already confusing crisis? The case of Somalia” in *International Affairs*, vol. 83, n° 6, 2007, pp. 1091-1106.
- MENKHAUS, Ken, *Somalia After the Ethiopian Occupation. First steps to end the conflict and combat extremism*, Enough Strategy Paper, 2009.
- MENKHAUS, Ken, “Violent Islamic Extremism: Al-Shabaab Recruitment in America”, Hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs of the United States Senate, March 11 2009
- TRONVOLL, Kjetil, “Ambiguous elections: the influence of non-electoral politics in Ethiopian democratisation” in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 47, n°3, 2009, pp. 449–474.
- UN Monitoring Group on Somalia, “Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1676 (2006)”, S/2006/913, 22 November 2006.