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Fast politics, slow justice: Ethiopia's Somali region two years after Abdi Iley

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This briefing paper takes stock of political dynamics in Ethiopia's Somali Regional State since the downfall of former regional President Abdi Mohamed Omar 'Iley' in August 2018. Drawing attention to the legacy of violence and abuses that have plagued Somali region until recently, the briefing paper highlights the positions of some of the most prominent political actors, in particular the regional government led by President Mustafa Mohammoud Omar and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). While the end of the Abdi 'Iley' administration brought important changes to the region, it led to a political realignment rather than to regime change or structural reform. However, political dynamics and crises have developed rapidly in the past year, but justice has been slow in the coming. Both in Somali region and Ethiopia at large continuities between current and previous administrations are apparent. They raise doubts as to whether a meaningful transitional justice process can take place in Somali region and the rest of the country.

Introduction

Federal security forces ended a decade of fear and terror in Ethiopia's Somali region when they arrested Abdi Mohamed Omar 'Iley' on 27 August 2018. During his presidency Abdi 'Iley' had established one of the [most abusive political regimes](#) in East Africa. His successor, current acting regional president [Mustafa Mohammoud Omar](#), was in many ways the antithesis of Abdi 'Iley' – an intellectual, an opposition activist and a former humanitarian worker. Abdi 'Iley' had been the enforcer of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front's (EPRDF) cruel security agenda in Ethiopia's Somali inhabited lowlands. Mustafa was an outspoken critic who spoke truth to power in spite of threats to his family and the killing of his brother by Abdi 'Iley's paramilitary [liyu or special police](#).

President Mustafa's appointment by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took place after the federal government's patience with Abdi 'Iley' had run its course. Abdi 'Iley's role in the [Somali-Oromo conflicts](#) between end of 2016 and early 2018 had put him at odds with Abiy's Oromo Democratic Party. When the former regional president instigated ethnic violence in Jigjiga and threatened secession of Somali Regional State, he was no longer tenable. With reformers in power both in Addis Ababa and the [regional capital Jigjiga](#), hopes were high that perpetrators of the Iley administration would be held accountable for their crimes, that

victims would be compensated and reconciliation be pursued. President Mustafa had a personal stake in holding the police accountable – something he had repeatedly expressed on social media before his presidency. Reformers in the region saw him as the perfect candidate to deal with the terrible legacy of the Abdi 'Iley' years.

Yet two years after Abdi 'Iley's removal, limited progress has been made in addressing the mass atrocities that occurred roughly between 2006 and 2018 in Ethiopia's Somali Regional State. What specialists refer to as [transitional justice](#) – judicial and socio-political measures that range from punishment to forgiveness and from symbolic recognition of past wrongs to the rehabilitation of victims – has not yet reached Ethiopia's Somali inhabited lowlands.

Taking stock of major political dynamics of the past two years, this briefing paper highlights the context of and obstacles to transitional justice in Ethiopia's Somali region. It argues that the end of the Abdi 'Iley' years some two years ago led to a political realignment – rather than regime change – within the region. While politics developed rapidly, plunging Ethiopia into deep political crisis, justice has been slow in the coming. As the 2021 elections approach, the window for a meaningful transitional justice process in Somali region might be rapidly closing.

State violence in Somali Ethiopia

Ethiopia's Somali Regional State – often referred to by its old administrative and geographic name Ogaden – has a long history of state sponsored violence, mass atrocities and human rights abuses. Going back to the [imperial conquest](#) of the Somali inhabited lowlands by Ethiopian soldiers at the end of the 19th century, episodes of violence have marked its past. Repeated cycles of violence and marginalisation from structures of power explain why many Ethiopian-Somalis see contemporary human rights violations as a [continuation of a violent past](#). Most, but not all of this violence, resulted from the gradual expansion of state presence into the Somali inhabited lowlands. This state formation process provoked waves of popular resistance and various types of disputes.

In the early 1990s the downfall of the Derg and civil strife in Somalia produced a fluid security situation in eastern Ethiopia. While the victorious Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) rebels reorganised the national army, the [Ethiopian National Defense Forces \(ENDF\)](#), the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) attempted to govern the region as the ruling party. When ONLF leaders became frustrated by the lack of genuine regional autonomy, they decided to ask for a referendum on self-determination. Federal security forces intervened, shut down party offices and imprisoned or harmed ONLF officials. The latter fled to the bush and took up [the armed struggle](#). In its first decade the ONLF insurgency was relatively low level and concentrated in the rural parts of the Ogaadeen inhabited areas of the region. Ethiopian soldiers in the various military camps – most of them non-Somalis – gained a reputation for mistreating civilians suspected of supporting the rebels. The Ogaden Human Rights Committee (OHRC), a local human rights group, compiled a total of 2395 extra-judicial killings, 1946 rapes, and over 3000 forced disappearances of mostly civilians [between 1995 and mid-2007](#). These abuses were ignored by most Ethiopians and the rest of the world.

Military commanders' brutal tactics in the Ogaadeen heartland and a sense of betrayal by the ruling EPRDF's promise of democratisation and self-rule animated the ONLF insurgency in these years. When Eritrea began providing military support to the ONLF, and while ENDF soldiers were distracted [fighting Islamists and nationalists in Somalia](#), the conflict in Somali Regional State escalated sharply. ONLF's attack on the [Abole oil exploration](#) site near Degehabur in April 2007 triggered a massive counter-insurgency campaign by the Ethiopian army. It led to the killing and displacement of thousands of inhabitants and triggered a [humanitarian crisis](#). Ethiopian soldiers committed a

series of [war crimes and crimes against humanity](#) during their 'counter-terrorism' operations in 2007 and 2008.

The conflict between the ONLF and the Ethiopian army took a decisive turn when a new regional paramilitary force, the *liyu* or special police, became involved in the counter-insurgency around 2008. The *liyu* police is composed of ethnic Somalis, predominantly from the same Ogaadeen clan family that make up the ranks of the ONLF. It continued the ENDF's strategy of collective punishment and became regional president Abdi 'Iley's [main instrument of oppression](#). *Liyu* policemen were familiar with the terrain and with kinship relations, which allowed them to monitor, infiltrate and intimidate local communities. The *liyu* police eventually took control of almost all security functions once held by the regular police, the custodial police, and the federal military. This included running the notorious Jigjiga Central Prison, locally known as [Jail Ogaadeen](#), in which thousands of inmates were tortured, abused and killed. The *liyu* police [stand accused](#) of committing serious crimes including massacring villagers, extrajudicial killings, torture, rape and the destruction of property.

Apart from state sponsored violence, communal conflict and inter-ethnic strife left their marks on Somali region. Communal conflicts typically revolve around land and resource conflicts, but have been aggravated by ethnic federalism as pastoralists and urban dwellers [claim territory for political purposes](#). For instance, territorial disputes between Ogaadeen sub-lineages and the Shekash in the Raaso area claimed hundreds of lives in the early 2000s. Mass violence also occurred as part of inter-ethnic conflicts at Somali region's borders with neighbouring Afar and Oromiya regions. This inter-ethnic violence had historical precedents, but increased after 1991 as [ethnic federalism](#) and EPRDF's divide and rule tactics exacerbated conflicts and tore ethnic communities apart. Disputes and tensions along the Somali-Oromiya border erupted into [full blown conflict and the displacement](#) of over a million persons between 2016 and 2018.

While there is consensus in the region on who committed certain atrocities, there is disagreement on who bears most of the blame for them in the past decade as well as the decades before them. While a thorough investigation is needed to determine criminal and moral responsibilities, the main perpetrators of violence in this period were ENDF commanders and soldiers, *liyu* police command and foot soldiers, the former regional president Abdi 'Iley', officials in the regional and federal security and intelligence branches as well as select ONLF commanders and soldiers. Various federal ministries and party officials played key roles in masterminding, ordering or tolerating abuses in the region, including the recently discovered lethal [environmental pollution](#) around Calub.

President Mustafa: from saviour to scapegoat

Abdi 'Iley's departure, in mid-2019, had left Jigjiga and Somali region politically shattered. A long list of problems needed fixing by the incoming administration of President Mustafa Mohammoud Omar. They included reigning in and reforming the *liyu* police, democratising regional politics, mending relations with neighboring Oromiya and Somaliland and improving governance within the region. President Mustafa and his supporters from the [Somali Region Alliance for Justice](#) (SRAJ) – most of them exiled activists and intellectuals – hit the ground running when they were parachuted into regional politics in August 2018. Thus began Somali region's political transition, which is still ongoing and is absorbed within Ethiopia's wider transition.

As a former activist based outside in Kenya, President Mustafa and his team initially lacked a power base in the region. Mustafa was appointed vice-chair of the ruling Ethiopian Somali People's Democratic Party (ESPDP). But the latter continued to be led by longstanding EPRDF cadres, in particular Ethiopia's current Minister of Finance [Ahmed Shide](#). President Mustafa brought a roster

of politicians and civil servants with him that were part of the SRAJ network. He planned to appoint them in leading positions in the region. Because most of these diaspora returnees carried foreign passports, they were barred from holding office and had to contend with being 'advisors' to the President. In April 2019 the ESPDP was renamed Somali Democratic Party and in December 2019 it merged with Prime Minister Abiy's new [multi-ethnic Prosperity Party](#).

While few doubted President Mustafa's credentials as a democracy and rights advocate, governing Somali region after Abdi 'Iley' proved to be a difficult and thankless task. His main challenge consisted of rebuilding a civilian administration after years of state despotism while both regional and national politics were in upheaval.

In a first step the new administration closed Jail Ogaadeen and screened the *liyu* soldiers. The President led the first screening effort while the new *liyu* police commander General [Mohamed Ahmed Mohamoud](#), a former ENDF officer opposed to Abdi 'Iley', and the then security bureau head Abdi Adil oversaw the second screening round. However, these screenings were limited to higher-ranking *liyu* police officers. Critics pointed out that the criteria for disbandment or re-enrollment in the force were not transparent. Neither did they sufficiently take into account victims' complaints against individual *liyu* policemen. In short, while some of the worst offenders were removed from the *liyu* police, the vast majority stayed on.

Mustafa's administration proposed creating a special mechanism for dealing with the hurt, trauma and guilt caused by Abdi 'Iley's' dictatorship as well as abuses by previous administrations. Presidential advisor [Jemal Dirie Kalif](#), a lawyer and former federal parliamentarian, has been preparing the groundwork for the creation of a regional truth, justice and reconciliation commission. Its main tasks would be an independent investigation into various human rights abuses occurring between 1974 – the beginning of the Derg – and 2018, the end of Abdi 'Iley'. Members of this commission would then propose measures of redress, ranging from compensating victims to prosecuting perpetrators. At the time of writing this commission had not been created.

To the outside world, it looked as if President Mustafa had joined Ethiopia's political establishment. To a certain degree he did. But behind the scenes he was struggling to position himself within the EPRDF and SDP party-state machines. He had to constantly defend his position and policies, fending off accusations of being too soft on security and having to learn how to cultivate relations with federal party and government officials. Under pressure from all sides, Mustafa's political bet for Somali region has been that the contested Prime Minister Abiy will prevail in the 2021 elections. By joining the Prosperity Party he hopes to increase Ethiopian-Somalis' visibility and say in national politics. The risk is, however, that President Mustafa will be seen as a sell-out to the Somali cause if Abiy continues to [backslide](#) on his democratic promises.

President Mustafa's reform agenda has been challenged on many fronts. While an assessment of his presidency is premature, it is clear that his reputation has suffered after two years of exposure in Somali region's harsh political environment. Few consider him as the saviour of the region that many wished him to be after Abdi 'Iley's' downfall. President Mustafa's political life has been made difficult both by his opponents and his own shortcomings. Attempts to reform the ruling party and to get rid of former Abdi 'Iley' supporters cost the President time and energy. In early 2019 he was called to Addis Ababa by senior federal officials who were critical of his record, a move that was widely seen as part of a [power struggle](#) between President Mustafa and SDP boss Ahmed Shide. A compromise eventually materialised between the two with Ahmed Shide remaining the party chairman while Mustafa appointed his followers into leading party positions.

In April and May this year power struggles and clashing personal interests within the regional administration spilled into the open, including allegations of corruption and treason. President

Mustafa [dismissed his regional security chief](#), once a close ally, in early April. At the end of May some 19 members of parliament made national headlines after walking out of a session [in protest of the government](#), only to be arrested and beaten up by the *liyu* police. [Aden Farah](#), the region's vice President and a reliable administrator, left the region to become the House of Federation's new speaker in June. More importantly, ever since the SDP decided to join the new Prosperity Party, a general sense of [mistrust and uncertainty](#) took hold of Somali region. Critics of the President who themselves often pursue their own personal agenda, accuse him of jeopardising regional autonomy.

Critique towards President Mustafa's administration comes from different corners. Some Ogaadeen complain that the region's new clan balance of power has seen their interests diminished. Non-Ogaadeen complain that the President has not sufficiently addressed their grievances, for example returning urban lands to members of the clan families around Jigjiga. Many express dissatisfaction not with the President, but with his administration, which is routinely accused of corruption and nepotism. Even observers sympathetic to the President admit that he lacked the skills to balance the fierce political competition over political appointments and public resources that has been the [hallmark of Somali region politics](#) – and which Abdi 'Iley' mastered so well. The President has described these criticisms as unjustified attempts by remnants of the old regime to discredit him. In many ways the dissatisfaction with President Mustafa's record so far reflects the outsized – and as it increasingly becomes clear now, unrealistic – expectations they had when he replaced Abdi 'Iley' as regional president.

ONLF's second coming and reality check

The ONLF leadership's return to Ethiopia was the other major dramatic change that occurred in Somali region in 2018. This comeback of the Ogaadeen rebels – a repeat of when the incoming EPRDF administration [reached out to the ONLF to govern](#) the newly established region in 1991 – was the result of the Asmara peace agreement signed on 21 October 2018. Bringing the ONLF back into the domestic political process was part of Prime Minister Abiy's invitation to various armed opposition groups to return to Ethiopia. The [Asmara declaration](#) was made possible by Abiy's [rapprochement with Eritrea](#) and his moves to weaken and isolate his main domestic competitor, the TPLF.

The Asmara declaration ended 24 years of armed struggle by the ONLF, but it was not a comprehensive peace agreement. It essentially consisted of a cessation of hostilities and a lofty promise to [establish a joint committee](#) that would 'further discuss substantive issues pertaining to the root causes of the conflict in the region'. In many ways, the Ethiopian government 'gave' peace to the ONLF without negotiating, compromising or resolving any of the political problems that have plagued Somali region as well as [past negotiations between the two parties](#). The Ogaadeen rebel leaders accepted the cessation of hostility because they had few other options. After being weakened militarily and politically, this historical liberation front had the chance of becoming politically relevant again inside Ethiopia.

The ONLF had hoped that the Asmara declaration would be the first step in a longer political dialogue with the Abiy government during which it would address the root causes of the decades old conflict – including accountability and revenue sharing of the Ogaden basin's [oil and gas reserves](#). ONLF leaders thought they could renegotiate the region's political architecture and secure their organisation a prominent position. That hope quickly eroded as the federal government relegated interactions with the ONLF to President Mustafa's regional government. As a member of the ONLF's delegation signing the Asmara accord remarked, the federal government 'did not prioritize the peace agreement'. The absence of a third-party monitoring mechanism of the Asmara declaration meant that there was no pressure on the federal government to continue 'peace talks' with the ONLF.

The ONLF leadership projects confidence that it can win the upcoming elections against the ruling SDP, but its return to the region has been somewhat of a reality check. Although ONLF fighters were meant to be integrated into the *Iiyu* police, only some 50 former rebels joined the region's security forces in early 2019. Most of the ex-fighters returned to their home areas after receiving a small payment. The disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of its fighters progressed only haltingly, leaving ex-combatants frustrated with what they perceived as a lack of a peace dividend in return for giving up the armed struggle.

The regional government hosted the ONLF leaders on the premises of the presidential compound upon their return. But as the former rebels began to mobilise supporters and establish party offices across the region, relations with the regional administration – its main political competitor – became increasingly strained. While the ONLF were careful not to criticise President Mustafa, they rightly viewed his administration as a leftover of the EPRDF engineered domination of the region. The President had his own qualms about the ONLF, in particular its earlier decision to [meet face to face with former President Abdi 'Iley'](#) during peace talks in Nairobi in early 2018. He is also wary of the [close relations](#) that ONLF leaders like Abdirahman Mahdi entertain with Jubbaland President Ahmed Madobe, in Somalia. In the first months of this year tensions between ONLF and the regional administration sparked minor conflicts in Afdheer, Eel Ogaden and Korahe. They occurred as officials attempted to stop ONLF cadres from putting up their flag in their newly established party offices. Among both its foot soldiers and leaders, considerable distrust remains between the ONLF and the regional government and its forces.

Despite these tensions, both sides have so far managed to contain tensions from spiraling out of control. With the help of [Conciliation Resources](#), a peacebuilding organization, the two parties established a joint committee in June 2019, which provides an avenue for direct dialogue. This committee met a couple of times and was revived during a [breakfast meeting](#) between ONLF chairman Abdirahman Mahdi and President Mustafa, along with other high ranking officials at the end of July this year. Prominent elders and businesspeople with links to both the ONLF and the regional government have facilitated dialogue between the two sides in the past.

To compete in the upcoming elections, the ONLF had to reorganize its party and leadership in conformity with Ethiopian electoral law. In November 2019 it held its [fourth party congress in Godey](#) and elected its longtime foreign secretary Abdirahman Mahdi as its new chairman. The former rebels successfully registered as a national political party and established party offices in Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa and 11 locations across Somali region's nine administrative zones. The ONLF also participated in national consultation forums with the government and major opposition parties. When the SDP, its main competitor in the region, joined the new Prosperity Party, the ONLF joined a [coalition of pro-federalist opposition parties](#) led by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), at the end of 2019. It [supported](#) the National Election Board of Ethiopia's decision to postpone the elections because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

ONLF's sudden return to the region revitalised what arguably had been a political organization that had struggled to remain relevant in a changing political and social media environment. The ONLF's historical claim to representing marginalized Ogaadeen communities in Ethiopia and abroad remains intact. Festivities surrounding its 36th anniversary in August this year illustrate this point. But the ONLF has failed to convince the non-Ogaaadeen that it cares about them as much as it does about the Ogaadeen. Moreover, while the ONLF's capacity to turn grievances into political loyalty is unquestioned, its ability to formulate new ideas and to implement convincing policies – in short, its ability to govern – remains untested. The creation of the Prosperity Part provides the ONLF with an opportunity to revive a more moderate form of the anti-colonial critique that it has for long levelled against the EPRDF and its satellite party, the former (E)S(P)DP. At this point in time two things are clear. First, the ONLF's comeback to the region has not, and is unlikely to, resolve

any of its structural political problems. Second, whatever happens between now and the 2021 federal and regional elections, the Ogaadeen vote will be split between the former rebels and those in favor of the ruling party.

Slow justice in Somali region

So far the Ethiopian government [has not apologised](#) to its Somali citizens – or any other of the country's many marginalized groups – for its historic wrongdoings. Some survivor and victims' groups, in particular former Jail Ogaadeen inmates, are lobbying for compensation and rehabilitation. Ogaadeen nationalists have 'celebrated' 'Ogaden Genocide Day' on 22 February 2020, claiming that some 90,000 people have been killed by security forces since 1994. Many agree that accountability and healing, reconciliation and compensation are direly needed to move forward in Somali region. But little has happened so far. Why has transitional justice been slow to come to Ethiopia's Somali region? There have been at least five obstacles to dealing with the past.

First, Ethiopia's federal Attorney General has been pursuing [legal proceedings](#) against former Somali region President Abdi 'Iley' and 46 individuals since early 2019. Criminal charges focus on instigating the killings and violence against non-Somalis during the 4 August 2018 [Jigjiga pogrom](#). Yet of the 46 accused, only six are in custody including the former Jail Ogaadeen chief Shamaahiye Sheikh Farah. The remaining defendants are on the run – for example, the notorious former *liyu* police commander Abdirahman Abdillahi Burale 'Labagole' who is rumoured to be in Turkey. Abdi 'Iley' is only on trial for his actions during the last few days of his disastrous rule, not for the many atrocities committed since he took over as the region's security head in 2006. This said, his prosecution is a step forward given that senior government officials benefitted from near complete impunity in the past.

Second, although Abdi 'Iley' was ousted, the pillars of his regime remained in place, in particular the *liyu* police and one-party rule of the (now) Somali Democratic Party. A [de-Baathification](#) of the *liyu* police – meaning its complete abolition – would have created more problems than it would have resolved, potentially destabilising the entire region. But the current choice of keeping the mostly unreformed *liyu* police as the region's main security provider is deeply problematic. Changes to the *liyu* police have been more cosmetic than substantial. For example, in August this year its members received new 'Somali State Forces' name tags. Not only are many perpetrators among the *liyu* police ranks, but the regular police continue to play second fiddle in law enforcement. In May this year *liyu* policemen reportedly killed five civilians at the border with Galmudug and in early September they were accused of killing several residents, including children, in Raaso. Continuity between the Abdi 'Iley' years and today is also notable in what does not exist in Somali region – an independent judiciary and trusted public institutions.

Third, layers of violence committed in the region over time complicate transitional justice. It is unclear what the scope and nature of redress should be. Who should be held accountable? How far back should measures go – to the 1960s and 1970s or only starting from 1991? Is the main aim to bring particular perpetrators to justice, or is the goal a more symbolic one, seeking recognition of and forgiveness for past wrongs? [Many transitional justice processes](#) grapple with such questions. In Somali region and Ethiopia more broadly a particularly thorny issue is the criminal and moral responsibility of federal politicians and security personnel. Both members of the former Abdi 'Iley' regime and its opponents recognise that atrocities by the ENDF and the *liyu* police would not have been possible without the federal government. Going back to Meles Zenawi, human rights violations in Somali region have very much been a product of a national policy. While Prime Minister Abiy is highly critical of the TPLF and while he [acknowledged the](#)

[mistreatment](#) of civilians by security forces soon after coming to power, he will be reluctant to hold national defense forces accountable for past abuses. Conversely, the ONLF also committed human rights abuses and is thus reluctant to push for accountability that might include its own fighters.

The absence of a functioning federal policy framework for dealing with past wrongs constitutes the fourth obstacle to justice in Somali region. The House of Peoples' Representatives [established](#) the Ethiopian Reconciliation Commission in February 2019 as part of Prime Minister Abiy's push for reconciliation and his [medemer](#) reforms. But so far there is no roadmap for transitional justice in Ethiopia. As legal scholar Solomon A. Dersso pointed out, the proclamation is [short on the specifics](#) of both the commission's 'material and temporal scope'. Given the lack of a political agreement between the country's main political forces – including the TPLF – it is likely that any attempt to shed light on past wrongdoings will be seen as retribution, not reconciliation. Moreover, most civilian and military officials remained in power after the nomination of Prime Minister Abiy. A full-blown transitional justice process would jeopardise their positions, including the government's stability, and is thus unlikely to happen. Unsurprisingly, to date, the federal government has not engaged with proposals on how to deal with past abuses in Somali region.

Finally, and as if these challenges were not enough, subsequent political crises and dynamics have preoccupied Ethiopian politicians over the last two years. While justice has been slow to come, politics has developed rapidly since the coming to power of Prime Minister Abiy and President Mustafa. [Ethnic unrest](#), the fragmentation of the EPRDF and the creation of the Prosperity Power have kept federal and regional officials busy. The political fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular the postponement of the 2020 federal and regional elections have distracted all major political players from addressing the past.

Can Somalis take the lead?

Two years after the arrest of President Abdi 'Iley', Ethiopia's Somali region is in a situation of what peace researchers refer to as ['negative peace'](#). This describes an absence of violence, but hints to the fact that conflicts have not been resolved and thus remain dormant. Given Somali region's tumultuous past, the current pacification and political liberalisation are a major achievement. Time will tell whether 2018 marked a real turning point – or simply a break from – the contested and violent politics of Ethiopia's Somali region. But political reform of the region's institutions has not occurred and it is doubtful this will happen any time soon.

In Somali region, as elsewhere, no justice means no peace. Two years after Abdi 'Iley's dismissal and the Asmara declaration the window for transitional justice is closing as political elites position themselves for the 2021 elections. What needs to be done then? Prime Minister Abiy's talk of [medemer](#) – asking Ethiopians for reconciliation and forgiveness – is laudable. But it is likely to fall on deaf ears among those who were tortured and raped in Jail Ogaadeen while perpetrators continue to walk the streets. Forgiveness after mass violence cannot be an individual act. Instead it should be part of a collective and political process that has not taken place so far in Somali region – or the rest of Ethiopia for that matter.

Dealing with Somali region's violent past will be tricky and is likely to unleash new conflicts. But as this briefing paper and [others](#) have argued, keeping silent about past abuses is even costlier in the long run as can be seen [in neighbouring Somalia](#). It is up to the Somali community in Ethiopia and its leaders to determine, which elements of a transitional justice procedure are most adequate to reckon with the past and which processes should be embarked up on first. This also includes deciding on the relative importance of restorative versus retributive justice steps. Although a

federal policy or framework for accountability is lacking, there is a dire need to put in place safeguards against the repetition of abuses of civilians in Ethiopia's Somali region, so-called '[guarantees of non-repetition](#)'.

An official reckoning with the ghosts of the past would force all parties to take a hard look at themselves. Despite an engrained reflex to blame ethnic outsiders – the TPLF, *habesha* highlanders or others – Ethiopian-Somalis will have to acknowledge that much of the daily violence and torture committed in Somali region over the past decade came from their own community, as individuals were torn between either supporting or fighting against the state. Outsiders – including the federal government – will have to admit their mistreatment of ethnic Somalis in Ethiopia, denying their constitutional rights at every turn of the region's troubled history.

Ethiopia's imperial legacy in its Somali periphery is very much what is at stake here. This explains why a transitional justice process solely based on customary Somali conflict resolution – *xeer* and blood compensation – will not suffice. The latter would be inadequate to address crimes and abuses committed by or with the knowledge of federal and regional state officials. While customary conflict resolution can bring about healing at community level, other legal and political measures that hold state and non-state actors accountable – including federal officials – will be needed.

With the very limited exception of the '[red terror trials](#)' carried out by the Ethiopian Special Prosecutor's Office against former leading officials of the Derg regime, modern Ethiopia has no tradition of state sanctioned transitional justice to hold perpetrators of mass violence accountable. Ethiopian-Somalis have paid heavily for a citizenship that was imposed on them and which many have come to accept with great reluctance – in the absence of a valid alternative. By initiating a homegrown transitional justice mechanism Somali region could not only make amends with its violent history, but also set a courageous example for the rest of Ethiopia to follow.



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