

EDITORIAL

My halting knowledge of Amharic leads me to suspect that this ancient tongue abounds with wise maxims and witty aphorisms. According to one which wonderfully speaks to Somali lifeways: “*Zoro zoro, mezgaw cheroro!*” “To wander and wander, only to wander back to the same spot!” The latest episode in the aimless political wanderings of the Somalis is the forced resignation of TFG (Transitional Federal Government) of Somalia President Abdullahi Yuusuf in the waning days of 2008. This came as a result of a bad row between him and Nuur ‘Adde, his second-appointed prime minister in six months. Meantime, factions galore in Mogadishu, with the old ICU (Islamic Courts Union) splintering into two factions, one that follows Sheikh Shariff, the new darling boy of the international community. The other, loyal to Hassan Dahir Awes, the seasoned politician-priest, who is a virtual prisoner in Asmara, of strongman President Isaias Afeworki of Eritrea. For their part Shabaab, the al-Qaeda-style extremists, continue to cause murder and mayhem in southern Somalia in a bid to impose a crude form of Shariah law in Somalia. Perhaps among their worst barbaric atrocities in 2008 has been the public stoning to death of a hapless thirteen year old lass, accused of adultery after she complained to authorities of having been gang-raped. Al Shabaab are also alleged to have dug up the tombs of Qaadriya saints (Qaadriya being a venerable Sufi –mystical-- brotherhood that marks the face of traditional Somali Islam) in order to destroy the bones of dead saints so as to prevent the customary visits of favour-seeking penitents. (Visits to Sufi

shrines are anathema to the theology of the militantly puritanical Wahhabi-influenced Shabaab). By desecrating the graves of Sufi burial places, Al-Shabaab have not only discredited themselves in Somali eyes but also may well have invited their own death knell. A counter movement of Somali Islamists (Ahl-as-Sunna wal-Jamma') has suddenly emerged to do battle with the extremists. A number of lethal skirmishes between the two have already taken place, in Balaad, a village outside of Mogadishu, for example, causing scores of casualties. Professor Samatar (no relation) contemptuously dismisses in the following interview the crude fundamentalist methods of Al-Shabaab as "millenarian mindlessness, given to violence with no hope for the society that embraces their primitive methods." In October of 2008, al-Shabaab took their murderous ways to the heretofore tranquil Somaliland Republic by target bombings of the Somaliland Presidency, the United Nations Headquarters and the Office of the Ethiopian Liaison in Hargeisa. Stay tuned for the coming orgy of internecine killings.

On the other hand, Sheikh Shariff is at the moment attending a reconciliation conference in Djibouti in order to strike a deal with the TFG, while the frustrated Awes looks on from Asmara. Meanwhile, the wily Meles Zenawi has persistently and vociferously vowed to pull his troops out of Somalia, but he never acts on his vow. Which calls to mind a paraphrased memorable line from *Hamlet's* Queen Gertrude: "The gentleman doth protest too much, methinks." Surely, Meles can afford to indulge in this doubletalk, for in the face of a badly divided, demoralized opposition he has triumphantly consolidated his grip on power back in Ethiopia.

Just in! In a surprise development, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed has been elected President of Somalia by the Somali parliamentarians convening in

nearby Djibouti. Word is that Ahmed has the conferees taken aback with an unexpected political savvy by outmanoeuvring both Prime Minister Nuur ‘Adde—who was thought to be a shoo-in for the post—and the wily behind-the-scenes manoeuvrer Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Abdisalam, who was always thought to be the power behind ‘Adde’s throne.

Equally surprising, Prime Minister Zenawi has finally made good on his promise to pull Ethiopian troops out of Somalia, the last units of which left the provincial capital of Baidoa in mid-January 2009. Unsurprisingly, al-Shabaab, too, have made good on their promise to take the city—which they did on the heels of the Ethiopian departure.

Once again, while not a *deus ex machine*, the essays in this 2008 volume seek to address various aspects of Horn of Africa life and lore. “Ahmed Speaks” presents the highlights of Horn of Africa’s Said Samatar’s interview with Professor Ahmed I. Samatar. “The May 2005 Elections and the Future of Ethiopia,” Merera Gudina’s brisk essay, is unusual in the sense that it is the work of an author who wears two hats—political and pedagogical. His political hat stems from the fact that as a long-serving member of the Ethiopian Parliament, he is MP Merera Gudina. As a Professor of Sociology and Dean of the Social Sciences at the University of Addis Ababa, he wears his academic hat in the Ethiopian academy. Theodore Vestal’s “Human and Economic Rights” makes a compelling case for the inseparable linkage between economic development and the protection of human rights. For a society to have a shot at an economic take-off, Vestal argues, there must be a transparent, accountable political system that observes the “rule of law” and “respects human rights.” Last but not least, the deliciously punned “Chewing over the Issue of Qat” represents Managing Editor Maureen O’Rourke’s maiden entry as an author into the pages of the *Horn*.