



Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta (right) with his Somalia counterpart Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo at State House, Nairobi. PHOTO | PSCU

SOMALIA RETURNING TO CIVIL WAR AND DRAGGING KENYA

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Villa Somalia's war against Jubaland and other regional states is a worrying case of misplaced priorities. First, it diverts vital resources from the fight against al-Shabab, which is Somalia's agent and necessary war. Second, it complicates Somalia's economic recovery process and provokes a war with Kenya; justified to sweep Farmajo's re-election wave in 2020/2021. Somalia must fix its attention on defeating the al-Shabaab and on development to drain the swamps of violent extremism..

The strategic partnership between President Abdullahi Farmajo and Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khayre that has held Somalia together since 2018 has done its course. Somalia is headed for

a historic election in 2020/2021. As the electoral fever kicks in, Somalia reflects two diametrically opposed electoral strategies. Somalia is waging "three wars".

The first “war” is a metaphorical one, a benign crusade for Somalia’s economic recovery and empowerment of the its people, which has enabled one of Africa’s poorest countries to epically return to the world economic stage. Moderates in Villa Somalia are pivoting Somalia from its historical preoccupation with militarism to development, poverty eradication and to drain the swamps of extremism.

Blissfully, Somalia is winning the war for development. Somalia cleared its arrears to the International Development Association (IDA) on March 5, 2020, completing the process of normalizing its financial relationship with the World Bank Group. With this clearance, Somalia has fully re-established its access to new resources to fund its development. Additionally, the IMF has forgiven some \$330 millions of Somalia’s festering sovereign debt under the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) and Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI) to promote growth and recovery over the coming years.

In the coming election, Khayre and the moderates in Villa Somalia can now claim credit, and possibly call in their debt from the Somali people!

But a second war threatens to undo all this. This war is a throwback to the tragic era of extreme militarism that pushed Somalia down the cliff of civil war in the 1990s. Under President Siyyad Barre, President Abdullahi Farmaajo’s uncle, Somalia’s Marehen ethnocracy trained its guns on rival clans inside Somalia and waged senseless wars against Somalia’s neighbors.

Feeding the Villa Somalia’s “wag the dog” strategy is a historic election bill that Farmaajo signed into law on February 21, 2020, in which Somalis will vote directly for parties with parliamentary seats being allocated according to the final tallies, which minimizes chances for Farmaajo’s re-election.

In many ways, Farmaajo’s re-election strategy has familiar echoes in the 1997 American political satire comedy film, *Wag the Dog*, where a spin-doctor fabricates a war in Albania to steal the headlines and distract voters from a presidential sex scandal.

Kenya is the scapegoat. Spin doctors in Villa Somalia are courting war with Kenya to whip Somali nationalism to a fever pitch, producing a mighty electoral wave to sweep Farmaajo back to power in 2020. A war with Kenya would justify suspending election and the extension of Farmaajo’s rule by at least two years.

Starting off the wag-the-dog strategy was a mysterious escape of Jubaland State Security Minister Abdirashid Hassan Abdinur, also known as Abdirashid Janan, from secret NISA prison in Mogadishu with the help of rival Marehan officials in President Farmaajo’s government on January 29, 2020. Janaan, a close confidant of President Ahmed Madobe, allegedly entered Kenya aboard a private jet.

The script for Farmaajo’s wag-the-dog strategy is the 1963-67 “Shifita War” between Kenya and Somalia. This was largely a proxy war in which the elite in Mogadishu aided an armed secessionist movement of Kenya’s ethnic Somalis to join a “Greater Somalia”.

It is déjà vu all over again. On February 29, 2020, Farmaajo and intelligence chiefs hosted and treated 11 parliamentarians from Kenya’s North-Eastern region (6 from Mandera, 3 from Wajir and 2 from Garissa) in Mogadishu. The logic of the visit was squarely ethnic mobilization: While most of the MPs who visited Somalia are from Garre and Degodia clans, those left behind were mostly Ogadenis said to support Jubaland President Ahmed Madobe (whose leadership Farmaajo does not recognize).

The next part of the wag-the-dog strategy was to provoke war with Kenya. Farmaajo moved to project FGS's new military might, trained his new militarism against Jubaland, which provides a buffer zone for Kenya against the al-Shabaab.

From early February, Villa Somalia started amassing troops on the border with Kenya. Out of the blues, Farmaajo mobilized at least 700 troops and deployed them to the Gedo region primarily to fragment Jubaland and stoke tensions with Kenya.

This strategy is working like clockwork. On February 8, 2020, FGS troops captured the town of Bulo Hawo in Gedo Region that borders Kenya, sparking a clash with the Jubaland state Dervish forces, pushing Jubaland soldiers into Kenya's Mandera County. Clashes between FGS troops and forces loyal to Janaan on the Kenyan border escalated in March, as anti-Kenya rhetoric spiked.

In a show of might, on February 28, 2020, FGS troops also launched attack on the regional militia, Ahlu-Sunna Wal-Jamaa (ASWJ), in Dhusamareb, Galmudug state, over political control of the state. The fighting left 22 people dead and many more injured, the heavy cost Somalis are paying for the new militarism. At least 4 Somali government soldiers were killed and several others wounded when a bomb blast targeted a military convoy

near the town of Warmahan, lower Shabelle region. This has effectively been returning Somalia back to Civil War.

Nairobi accused Somalia of violating its territorial integrity by having its soldiers fight on Kenyan soil, but wisely resisted provocations. On February 9, 2020, the newly appointed deputy governor for Gedo region, Abdi Moalimu, and Farmaajo man threatened to mobilize FGS troops to invade Kenya, warning that: "We shall attack Kenya up to Nairobi".

In speech to the UN Security Council, on February 27, 2020, Somalia's United Nations envoy, Ambassador Abukar Dahir Osman, denounced Kenya as a "destabilizing force" and threatened to initiate UN action against the country for allegedly "interfering in Somalia's internal affairs".

Villa Somalia's war against Jubaland and other regional states is a worrying case of misplaced priorities. It diverts vital resources from the fight against al-Shabab, Somalia's third, and necessary, war. Somalia must fix its attention on defeating the al-Shabaab and on development to drain the swamps of violent extremism.

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