



API Research Note

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MIRAA GEOPOLITICS AND ITS INFLUENCE IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

PETER KAGWANJA

The Horn of Africa geopolitics has largely been shaped by three factors. First is the spillover effects of Somali nationalism propelled by political and territorial claims against Somalia's neighbors (Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya) with ethnic Somali population. Second, and more recent factor, is the spillover effect of radicalization and violent extremism in Somalia into Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti and the larger Eastern Africa region.

The third factor is the role of the "Green Gold" (Miraa or Khat) now under threat. However, the plant (Miraa or Khat) continues to serve as the unifying symbol of a divided Horn of Africa region.

Extremists Galore

Five decades ago, the famous theoretician, Frantz Fanon, while commenting on the political upheavals in post-colonial Africa, likened the continent to a revolver. In Fanon's analogy, the Congo was a trigger, and which continues to be an epicenter of conflicts in Africa's Great Lakes region. In this configuration, the Horn of Africa is the revolving cylinder or chamber.

As I travelled to Djibouti as the lead consultant in a region-wide process to develop an IGAD strategy for preventing and countering violent Extremism in the region on

September 17-20, I reflected on Fanon's concern with the upheavals in the Horn of Africa. It became apparent to me that the status of the horn region as the serious flashpoint of conflict in Africa has not changed much and is unlikely to change if measures are not put in place to combat the myriad threats to security.

Three factors are shaping the geopolitics of the Horn of Africa region. The first is the spillover effects of Somali nationalism propelled by political and territorial claims against Somalia's neighbors (Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya) with ethnic Somali population.

These claims led to four wars with Ethiopia including the 1960-1964 Border War; the 1977-1978 Ogaden War; and the 1982 border clash and the 1998-2000 cross-border warfare during the turbulent era of warlords. It also contributed to the Somali Secessionist War in Northern Kenya better known as the Shifto War (1963-1968) and to a great extent the Djiboutian Civil War (1991-1994).

Today, the Somali question lingers on in subtler forms, complicated by the emergence of large Somali refugee communities and Diasporas across Africa and the world.

The second, and more recent, factor is the spillover effect of radicalization and violent extremism in Somalia into Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti and the larger Eastern Africa region. This is a logical outcome of decades of Somali Civil War and state collapse which gave rise to the al-Qaida-affiliated Al-Shabaab Islamist group in Somalia, which is now the focus of IGAD's proposed plan to prevent and counter violent extremism.

The third factor is the role of the "Green Gold" (Miraa or khat) now under threat. Miraa is the softer side of an otherwise long history of tensions that for centuries defined relations between the 'highlanders' and the 'lowlanders' in the Horn of Africa, particularly the Somalis.

Miraa, native to the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, is the most geographically spread tea native to Africa growing in Swaziland and Mozambique, the Great Lakes region of Africa and South Africa where it isn't known as 'Bushman tea'.

An estimated 5 to 10 million people globally use khat on a daily basis. In Djibouti, the afternoon from 12.30pm to 4.00pm is devoted to chewing the plant, which unites the President and the poor.

Miraa splits the Horn of Africa region into two zones: that of producers and exporters of the leaf (Kenya and Ethiopia) and that of importers and consumers (Somalia and Djibouti).

Ethiopia is not only the home of coffee but is widely held as the original home of the khat leaf, chewed or taken as tea.

The leaf is also a major income earner for Ethiopia, which exported a record 47,000 tons of Khat in 2012/2013, earning \$271 million. The lion's share of Ethiopia's khat went to Somalia and Djibouti from where it earned \$201 millions and \$42 million respectively. Sales to the UK netted \$14 million.

On its part, in 2013, Kenya exported an average of 28 tons of the Miraa leaf daily to Somalia. According to a survey by USAid in 2011, Miraa exports earned Kenya Sh16.5 billion in the previous five years, making it the top export fresh product destined for African countries.

Somalia is Kenya's main trading block, accounting for 90 per cent of the exports. Other markets include Djibouti, Mozambique, and Malawi.

However, the plant is at the center of regional and global geopolitics. In their study, "Socio-Economic, Religious and Educational Significance of Miraa (*Cartha Edulis*): A Case of Meru North Region, Kenya", David Bururia and Jane Nyaga observe that in the last few decades, "the product has assumed political dimension".

Although Miraa is the tea grown widely across Africa, it's woes in the marketplace started when the prime movers of western civilization failed to pick it among other teas and coffees in their regular beverages on the breakfast tables. It has since become a victim of western orientalist thinking that it is inferior and more harmful than other teas.

Although the World Health Organization (WHO) classified Miraa as a drug of abuse in 1980, it indicated that khat has less effect than tobacco or alcohol, and does not consider Khat to be seriously addictive. Despite its non-threatening nature perhaps next to coffee or tea, Khat has been targeted by anti-drug organizations across Europe and North America, and African and Asian countries are facing pressure to ban the leaf.

More recently, the decision by Britain to ban the export of the plant in 2013 led to the loss of incomes in those growing regions. Kenya fetched an estimated £12.7 million from the sale of Miraa to the UK in 2010. This was interpreted as a punishment to for electing President Uhuru Kenyatta and his deputy William Ruto who were then facing trial at the International Criminal Court.

However, Miraa is enjoying some victory at home. In 2016, President Kenyatta allocated a budget of KSh1 billion to support Miraa growers from the challenges they encountered because of the ban of Miraa in the European markets.

Miraa is also shaping local politics. Meru Governor, Peter Munya, may have lost the battle for re-election before the first ballot is cast for his diplomatic misadventure into Somalia with good intention to open a new market for the product to improve his chances ahead of next year's election. According to one source, the Meru Miraa growers may lost no less than Ksh300 million in incomes when Mogadishu imposed a temporary ban on Miraa export to Somalia as a response to Munya's diplomatic meddling in internal Somalia affairs by controversially declaring support to Somaliland, a breakaway region of Somalia.

Miraa is dividing Africa and the West, but it continues to serve as the unifying symbol of a divided Horn of Africa region.

Professor Peter Kagwanja is the Chief Executive of Africa Policy Institute