

Sheikh Sharief on A Rickety Perch

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The Somali tragedy continues being played on the open stage of the Horn of Africa without an interlude. Of late, only the *dramatis personae* have changed: *exeunt* Abdullahi Yusuf, Nur Adde, *et al*; *enter* Sheikh Sharief, Omer Abdurahied, *et al*. The new cast of actors are supposed to work under the label of “Transitional Federal Government” but prefer to call themselves a “Government of National Unity” – an empty claim that bears no relation to the reality on the ground and is devoid of any legitimacy derived from the inflated parliament, much less the ‘National’ Reconciliation Conference held in Djibouti early this year.



Abdillahi Yusuf

The organizers of that conference, haughtily overconfident, dismissed outright some important players and ignored the administrations in Hargeisa and Garowe. Foreign hands were as ubiquitous as ever, and none was so ubiquitous as the hand of Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General to Somalia, and a previous protégé of Boutros-Ghali who called him an ‘eel’ in his memoirs, *Unvanquished*, and whose aide called Ould Abdallah (as related by Boutros-Ghali in the same memoirs) a ‘despicable turncoat’. The Somali people together with their politicians, warlords, TFGs and spectators of their drama have long lost confidence in and respect for the UN Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS). They consider it a place where the considerable monetary assistance earmarked for building peace and advancing reconciliation in Somalia is mismanaged and misappropriated on a scale hitherto unseen; and where every effort – including bribery and corruption – is employed to thwart honest efforts in order to prolong the life of the goose that lays the golden egg on a regular basis. In fact, neither the UNDP office for Somalia nor UNPOS (both of which are based in Nairobi) has been spared the execration of enlightened Somalis.

Ordinarily, Somalis have a soft spot for their co-religionists and had therefore high hopes at the outset that their brother, Ould Abdallah, would change the old ways and embark on a dynamic, fruitful course in order to push the peace process forward relentlessly and without fear or favor. His long diplomatic practice and his experience in similar situations in Burundi, the UN Office for West Africa and as a ‘Special Envoy’ to the Sudan on Darfur also suggested that he would apply some tested skills to the gnawing problems staring him in the face.

His job, before all else, was to gain the trust of all parties and establish himself as a neutral, impartial arbiter; his method should have been the use of the force of persuasion; and his influence should have emanated from the force of his example. To do all this, a certain degree of detachment was required of him – not too close to anyone and not too distant from anyone. He was required to put himself far above the petty quarrels of his daily interlocutors on the Somali side, but far below the dizzy height of his exalted

bureaucratic level. It is a difficult balance to maintain, given the intensity of interaction and the human capacity to love and loathe.

However, given the multiple weaknesses of the Somali authorities – their highest as well as their lowest – it was apparently difficult for him to resist the temptation of playing the role of an overlord and, accordingly, to dictate. By some accounts that was the cause of his clash with Abdullahi Yusuf – a hardheaded, undiplomatic, self-confident and forthright soldier, undeterred by two long-term imprisonments, a liver disease and subsequent transplant, and hardened by long years of struggle in search of supreme power. Richard Dowden said the following about him in his book, *Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles*, (published this year):

“Look into the hawk face of Abdillahi Yusuf, who was elected President in exile in 2004 and was carried to Mogadishu by the Ethiopian invasion of 2006: it is easy to see how such a land might breed such a man. Two black eyes, hard as stone glitter in a face that makes a vulture look gentle. An army colonel who nearly captured Addis Ababa in 1978, then a rebel against Siad Barre, Somalia’s dictator from 1969 to 1991, Yusuf spent years in jail, but emerged to become the dictator of the self-declared statelet of Puntland in north-east Somalia.”

Of course, I was not privy to the details of what happened between Ould Abdallah and Abdullahi but, I do know that one was an internationally recognized head of State and the other a mere international civil servant however exalted his rank. The latter controlled the resources which the former badly needed – an anomaly which rendered the exercise of sovereignty nominal. It reminds me of Egypt of the 1930s when the British Ambassador in Cairo used to dictate to the King as to when he should make a cabinet reshuffle and who should be in it. But the dictation to Abdullahi tended to come also from the Ethiopians and, according to some accounts, he could not get Gen. Gebre to follow his instructions or, when he could no longer bear with him, to have him transferred. Abdullahi, as obdurate as ever, proved to be a tough nut to crack. He was imprisoned both by Siad Barre and Mengistu for many years and never yielded to them. What in the end broke his back, however, was the rigidity of mind with which he approached the internal and deepening divisions of his TFG – divisions that were exploited by outsiders to the full. His detractors often argued that the man never managed, if he tried, to rid himself of the ‘*jahbad* culture’ and that he could not see the incongruity between his earlier role as a leader of a fighting front, and his new role as head of State.

In the event, Abdullahi resigned, unable to bear further the pressures that came to him from all sides, and he subsequently went into a self-imposed exile in the Yemen. From then on the events leading to the Djibouti Conference of January, 2009 quickly gained

pace and the Conference was held in haste without much ado. Its composition, its deliberations and its results were altogether exceptional. Never before was the membership of Parliament doubled overnight without due regard to budgetary considerations, to the internal management of such a monolith, and to an outcry from the public. Never before was a so-called “National Reconciliation Conference” organized so hurriedly and was so orchestrated as to favor one specific group and only one presidential candidate. The assumptions on which such unprecedented actions were based were not studiously studied beforehand, and they all turned out to be wrong. It was said long ago that neither a soldier nor a priest could be a good politician, and a statement to the effect that the soldier fails in the field of politics was also attributed to Mahatma Gandhi. Both are truisms. Abdullahi, as a soldier has proved the point, and so has his successor – a sheikh.

The election of Sheikh Sharief as a head of State presiding over a new composite TFG was meant to placate the Islamists – those who were inside the country as well as those who were still outside it in the cave of Adullam. Alas, he was immediately condemned by none other than his former boss in the Islamic Courts Union, Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys. Sheikh Hassan’s initial reaction was not taken seriously because it was thought that since the two sheikhs were close collaborators and very much of a muchness in earlier times they would be able to patch their differences, and that Sheikh Hassan would fall in line. Sheikh Hassan flew, unexpectedly, from Asmara to Mogadishu and - unexpectedly again - proved to be fleet of foot, despite his age, in putting together a stiff armed opposition to Sheikh Sharief, thereby swelling the ranks of armed opponents such as the Shabaab and Hizbul-Islam. Sheikh Hassan’s fury is clearly not due to *odium theologicum*, but to *odium personali*. How on earth could an acolyte of his aspire to the presidency of the republic and go over the top of his head! Sheikh Sharief sent for him several times and pleaded with him through intermediaries but Sheikh Hassan, always single-minded, remains as fiercely and as implacably hostile as ever.

In any case, it is commonplace knowledge that Sheikh Sharief’s “Government of National Unity” is presiding over discord, division and disunity. Despite generous external assistance – because no one wants the Shabaab to take over the country – his TFG controls only a few blocks of the capital city and he is regarded as less than the Mayor of Mogadishu. Those who fought tooth and nail in the Diaspora to bring down Abdullahi Yusuf’s TFG are now loud everywhere drumming up support for his TFG and begging others to save it from falling off the precipice. I have personally supported Abdulqasim’s TNG and Abdullahi’s TFG because I thought that a reasonable move towards reconstituting the State should be encouraged and supported. I have learnt since then and I saw that we were following the same path that led us nowhere.

Sheikh Sharief has merely given us a repeat of Abdullahi Yusuf’s performance: he is fortified in Villa Somalia; he is protected by his clan militia and moves to and from the airport in an AMISOM tank or APC; the Ethiopians are his closest allies (contingents of their army, despite denials, have been spotted in many areas of the country and his Minister of National Security, Col. Omer Hashi, who was fiercely and vociferously opposed previously to the Ethiopians has just returned from Addis Ababa by land via

Godey); the Sheikh complains about the presence of Al-Qaidah and of foreign fighters on the side of the opposition; he complains about Eritreans – his earlier benefactors – and condemns their involvement; he has asked for foreign forces to come into the country; despite the departure of the Ethiopians the carnage and the mayhem continue unabated and thousands of people had to flee to neighboring areas in desperate search for safety, for food and for shelter; he often travels abroad begging for money; and, last but not least, he begs the opposition to sit and negotiate with him.

I realize that it is not fair to blame all this on Sheikh Sharief. But, was he fair when he blamed them all on Abdullahi Yusuf? Was he not the one, among others, who refused to negotiate with the previous TFG in Khartoum I and Khartoum II when Abdullahi was begging them before the Ethiopians came in? Is he not being answered the way he had answered Abdullahi, that the Ethiopians (now AMISOM) must leave the country prior to any consideration of negotiation? Is it not ironic that the Sheikh finds himself in the same position Abdullahi was in 2006? Is it not hypocritical on the part of those in the Diaspora who were previously condemning Abdullahi for the same exact situation to shriek now and canvass for the support of the Sheikh?

Khartoum I and II offered the best chance of solving the Somali problem through negotiation and mutual accommodation. The Islamic Courts Union (ICU) of which Sheikh Sharief was a prominent leader was in a position to negotiate from a point of strength. The ICU squandered that opportunity and its leaders are paying for their folly in exile and in blood. Surely, wiser counsels did not prevail then. Incidentally, Abdullahi was also pilloried, internally and externally, for usurping the powers of his prime minister. Is Sheikh Sharief not doing the same thing? All the decisions emanate from him and his close clansmen in the government. That was exactly what was said about Abdullahi too. We seldom here about Omer Abdurashied. Is he suffering in silence? Sheikh Sharief is not of course the first Somali president to overshadow his prime minister, nor was Abdullahi the first. But, are we not demeaning ourselves by viewing the vices of Abdullahi as the virtues of Sheikh Sharief?

In so far as foreign interests are concerned Abdullahi was rigidly unco-operative. Sheikh Sharief has been accused of being his opposite: pliable and cooperative. The recently signed 'Memorandum of Understanding' between Kenya and Somalia (i.e. Sheikh Sharief's TFG) has been cited as a case in point. It has been alleged that the government ceded a lot of ground to Kenya by signing the Memorandum of Understanding on the continental shelf and beyond. Whether or not there is any force in that allegation the matter raises too many questions and creates too many suspicions. How can a transitional government which has yet to have a leg to stand upon and is barricaded in a puny section of the Capital ignore the imperatives of its own survival and enter into negotiation with a foreign government and sign an agreement with it? What raises the suspicions further are the dubious circumstances in which both the negotiation and the signing took place. The whole affair was shrouded in secrecy: neither the relevant minister in charge of marine resources, nor the foreign minister who should have ordinarily signed the Memorandum with his Kenyan counterpart had been apprised, much less involved. In the event, the whole affair was conducted and concluded single-

handedly by a minister who is one of the closest members of Sheikh Sharief's kitchen cabinet. Even the Cabinet was kept in the dark and the matter has not, thus far, been brought before parliament even after it sparked off a heated controversy.

Norway has stated – clearly, plainly and officially - that it provided technical advice to the Somali government on the matter. But Norway happened to be in cahoots with Kenya and could not therefore be regarded as a disinterested and reliable advisor. It has also come to light that Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah had a role in this and he has been implicated in what seems to be a nefarious scheme. It is an open secret that some of Sheikh Sharief's ministers had been appointed at his behest. Both Sahnoun and Oakley who came before him had been accused of siding with Aideed. Shanoun was relieved of his duty as a result, and Oakely went into great pains to explain himself. Ould Abdallah did not even try to keep a distance so as to be seen as impartial. On the contrary, he openly allied himself with one specific group, and he even openly accepted a reward from them in London. In the face of all this, Ban Ki-Moon remains unmoved, presumably because no complaints reached him.



Sh. Sharief Ahmed



Ould-Abdallah

I am told that Ould-Abdallah is about to leave on his own because he wants to enter the presidential race in his country, Mauritania. If this information is correct, he will surely be missed by Sheikh Sharief and some other Somalis; but many other Somalis will be relieved. His legacy will be far from a happy one. Sheikh Sharief is on a rickety perch; there are serious doubts as to whether his government will survive the

final onslaught promised by the opposition Islamist groups, and Ould-Abdallah might see with his own eyes the government and parliament he had conspired to install fall to dust under his very nose. To be fair, the government itself has promised a decisive battle to begin soon in order to secure the defeat of the opposition.

Several factors are in its favor: first, the West, and by proxy Ethiopia, are determined to prevent a takeover of the country by the Shabaab and we are already witnessing Ethiopian intervention in a more intelligent form; secondly, the safety of the shipping lanes in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean has now become contingent upon stabilizing the country; finally, though their fate hangs in the balance there are real possibilities of saving Sheikh Sharief and his nominal government if 'Somaliland' and Puntland realize their common threat by a Shabaab takeover, sink their differences – or at least put them aside for the time being - for their own greater good, merge their fighting forces and reinforce those already arrayed against the anti-government Islamists. With a heavy dose of high quality training, infusion of funds and supply of modern weapons they stand the best chance of bringing the opposing forces to their knees. To ossify the gains it would then be necessary to embark on a program of re-education and re-orientation so as to inculcate in the minds of the young that Islam is truly a religion of peace. In this regard, the preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO is instructive, for it states that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed”