

# Understanding Somali Opposition to the TFG: Clanism by other Names

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## Introduction

The Horn of Africa nation of Somalia gained its independence in 1960. Some 47 years later, the ship of state is struggling to find its moorings. The air of promise of a bright future that is said to have swept the country at the advent of independence soon gave way, in stages, to the sort of creeping misery that unfailingly accompanies substandard governance. Thus began decades-long era of scandalous misrule, public disorder, calamitous civil war, secessionist cabal, man-made famine, and *mooryaan*-style abuse of power by a ferocious clano-religious oligarchy. The collective damage wrought by the cascade of unmitigated, disastrous events of the past several decades is all too real and equally painful to recount. Given that wretched record, one can be forgiven for taking a dim view of Somali political discourse altogether as an exercise in futility or worse.

The workings of that unhappy saga as it relates to political discourse in the society have been unfolding during this period in a peculiar manner that often seems impenetrable even for Somali observers as it has been for non-Somalis. All indications point to the Somali nation being one of a couple of truly homogeneous societies on earth; a unique attribute that masks intense distrust between the clans that would rival the stomach-churning genocidal episodes witnessed in the former Yugoslavia or even the Great Lakes region of East-Central Africa. Needless to say, this horrid atmosphere is fostered and perpetuated by the urban elites. There is in fact an element of unreality concerning the apparent disconnect between the words and the deeds of many people associated with Somali politics, especially among the so-called opposition. Its practitioners, which include many in the intelligentsia, seldom chose to openly discuss their issues of real concern. This crop of Somali political activists and their ilk feign undue sophistication as they eagerly sound off on important topics such as religion or democracy in the abstract. Such lofty ideals, though, are in reality peripheral to the agenda of the archetypical member the resentful opposition group. Their heartfelt preoccupation, more often than not, seems to be to score different kind of points; they rather indulge surreptitiously in furthering the putrid causes of **clan power politics**, preferably without having to declare intentions.

Viewed from that vantage point, Somalia's political troubles of the recent past do not seem to bode well for the country's future as a viable nation state. However, there is one all-important saving grace: **ordinary Somalis, true to form, are not in the habit of giving up on anything so easily—especially their common destiny, just because the circumstances are difficult at a given juncture in history.** Though long-suffering, due to the cumulative deadweight of the foregoing politically perverted pathologies, **Somalis through their clan representatives have, towards the end of 2004, managed to reinstitute a broad-based Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in a national reconciliation conference held Embegati, Kenya.** This

incredible feat was accomplished after two long years of continuous negotiations by politicians from all communities, throughout the country. Active participants included traditional leaders, members of the intelligentsia, representatives of civil society groups, religious leaders, women's groups, etc.

Virtually all the main warlords that controlled fiefdoms within the country were not only present but have, towards the end of the conference, played an important role in bringing its marathon sessions to fruition. Their public support of President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed and subsequently Prime Minister Ali Mohamed Gedi, as national leaders, had signaled to their supporters within the country and in the Diaspora willingness to see the nation move forward. That solidified the overwhelming support the President, the Prime Minister and the Transitional Federal Institutions as a whole received from the assembled conference delegates.

## Genesis of the Current Opposition

Yet, the long-awaited national government that emerged out of that arduous negotiating process has been at some risk for first two and half years of its existence. Why? As has been revealed by subsequent events, there are, sad to say, internal as well as external groups and individual Somalis that do not want to see the return of any central authority in Somalia. Campaigning under different guises, this ensemble, which we shall call the “opposition”, is united on one overriding objective: to derail the TFG and its key institutions; a goal which is increasingly proving to be an exceedingly elusive target for them.

The opposition to the TFG is a motley group. It includes an increasingly violence-prone congregation of religious extremists within the now defunct Union Islamic Courts known by their Arabic moniker: "al-Shabaab" and their diehard neo-clanist allies. Both factions have demonstrated certain disdain for pursuing peaceful, negotiated settlement of political differences. Even if they come to the realization that Somalia's central government is—as all indications would suggest—on its way to success, neither group would be satisfied to go along with the new dispensation until and unless one of their numbers—an exchangeable cadre—is at the helm. That very much reflects the attitude of the rest of the seething opposition vis-à-vis the TFG. They are calling for a "winner-take-all" scenario provided they are the winners—an approach that does not leave any room for peaceful resolution of political issues in the country. But unbeknownst to them, that stance is also the albatross around their necks that will, in due course, doom their scheme and set the stage for the unraveling of their rejectionist coalition leading ultimately to their ignominious defeat.

There are also various other minor actors within the ranks of the opposition. Many of these are pit players serving as stand-in proxies for a range of interest groups (that may wish to operate behind the scenes).

## Keeping Eye on the Prize

The TFG, by contrast, is keeping a keen eye on the prize as it enjoys a wide-ranging support from ordinary, peaceable Somalis in all parts of the country. (But you would not know this from the shrieks of the vocal opposition in the Diaspora, composed as it is of out-of-touch, neo-clanist

elites). For instance, in the well publicized National Reconciliation Conference (NRC) that was effectively concluded in Mogadishu in late August, 2007, more than 2,000 delegates representing every Somali community heeded the call of the TFG. These delegates traveled from all corners of the country to help heal the nation by actively contributing to the government's efforts to usher an era of peace and reconciliation. Their role has been largely to set the broad agenda, outline elements required to be the building blocks for the desired peace and reconciliation, and to develop consensus on equitable solutions to outstanding political issues. And they have, by all accounts, been successful in all of these tasks.

In a matter of weeks they freely discussed and resolved the major issues of contention between the clans, including developing a consensus agreement that real properties (seized during the civil war) be restored to their rightful owners, the resumption of inter-community cooperation and the promotion of good governance throughout the country under the extant federal system that affords communities meaningful self-rule. This has undoubtedly been a major achievement for the TFG. It attests to the fact that the Transitional Federal Government, warts and all, is making real progress in keeping the country together and moving it in the right direction. It is also note worthy that the government was not deterred by the violent opposition's attempts at interference, including continual pestering the conference. They have even lobbed a couple of grenades, here and there, in the direction of the well protected meeting halls housing the peace-making assemblage. As usual they mainly victimized civilians going about their daily lives. Characteristically, the so-called opposition has never expressed any remorse about killing and maiming of innocent bystanders. Perhaps in their fanaticism such casualties are the cost of doing business; the business of seizing political power for themselves.

Lacking meaningful popular support inside the country, the opposition on the other hand relies on reprehensible media outlets such as the "BBC Somali Service", increasingly the VOA Somali, planted articles, hired academics and rogue journalists to push their venomous, anti-TFG propaganda. Oddly, many in the opposition are among the most privileged small minority of Somalis who have earned degrees from institutions of higher learning in the developed world. It is scandalous that their actions are informed by clan power politics, though they would be loath to admit to it publicly. Their enduring loyalty is, undeniably, to the primordial social construct that had for centuries pervaded the lives of the unlettered pastoralists on the plains of the Somali Peninsula. Even in casual conversations, these clan-centered members of the Somali opposition seem to be on autopilot chanting to themselves: "I have a TFG to destroy (to the bitter end) and my clan's baleful agenda to advance before I rest", to paraphrase Robert Frost's famous line.

This scenario is not far fetched. Every Somali knows that the TFG came about as a last ditch effort by all Somalis to restore the nation to its rightful place in the community of nations. With more than a dozen major reconciliation conferences ending in utter failure between 1991 and 2002, the cause of Somali national reconciliation was becoming desperate by the day. Indeed, by the late-1990s, many Somalia observers within and outside the country have started to mull over the all too real possibility of witnessing the Somali nation state's withering in the vine. Why? Clan-centered politics at the national level was unsurprisingly becoming an unworkable proposition.

From that standpoint alone, it was nothing less than miraculous that after two years of excruciating conferencing—that on more than one occasion came to near total collapse—Somali conferees were able to cobble together a government of national unity. That it was a transitional in scope (given the then prevailing atmosphere of mutual suspicion among Somalis) indicated yet another hopeful sign that the TFG would be embraced as the most plausible springboard to democratic governance in the country. Clearly it had the requisite, important feature of legitimacy due to the near unanimous support of the assembled factions plus a measure of international support.

## Chameleon Opposition and Internecine Wars

Suddenly and without prior notice, many of the warlords who in the previous 14 years made life a living hell for Somalis in much of the south began to renege on their public support for the TFG. Meanwhile, they continued to hold ministerial portfolios within the new national government. Their stated reason for this apparent double-dealing was predicated on the TFG's initial balking at its previously forecasted move to Mogadishu—then a lawless city that was overflowing with all kinds of armaments in the hands of highly unscrupulous, *mooriyaan* operators, at every turn. Besides, some of the warlords as well as others on the side the Islamic Courts were already issuing thinly veiled statements that in effect telegraphed their unhappiness with sharing power with a legitimate Somali national government.

The real reason for the warlord reversal though had little to do with the temporary seat of the TFG, since Mogadishu's status as national capital was never in dispute; it had everything to do, however, with their hankering for maintaining the ill-gotten wealth that they were accumulating at a furious base from a slew of rackets, including the sale of narcotics such as *kat* and other sources of illicit trade, including extortion not to mention the piracy of ships on the high seas. Those illicit trade activities were operated directly from the respective fiefdoms of the various warlords (some of whom later cloaked themselves in religious garb) in Mogadishu and in other locations in the lower Juba area, where they controlled by force of arms.

Obviously, the warlords felt that any central government would jeopardize or put to a stop the illicit economic gravy-train from which they had unlawfully benefited for over a decade. And so they resolved to fight the TFG tooth and nail. The ensuing impasse was broken when the warlords got entangled with the interests of a well known philanthropist in Mogadishu who at the time supported the Islamic Courts as a means of maintaining order and keeping a semblance of peace in areas under his purview.

The then disparate Islamic Courts were all well armed but they lacked operational unity. That changed quickly on a fateful moment in late May, 2006 when the big-name warlords threw the gauntlet and attacked the above mentioned key ally of the Islamic Courts. The speed with which the so-called Islamic Courts were able to vanquish the powerful, entrenched warlords—with wads of freshly minted American dollars under their disposal—came as a surprise to the outside world (but not to Somalis).

This is because due to the on-going effective propaganda machine of some warlords, unsuspecting people have been given the wrong impression concerning the interrelations

between warlords of different stripes and their at times interlocking, unlawful enterprises. This includes the creation of a false dichotomy between the well-known, first tier warlords and a second tier group of more ambitious warlords. It is that more vicious second tier group that had superseded the first bunch because of a singular strategic decision they had made a couple years earlier, namely to incorporate a rigid interpretation of Islam into their program. This conversion on the road to dominant position in political power for one sub-clan (not unlike Peter's conversion on the road Damascus) gave them the emotional appeal with which they were able to draw many of the unemployed youth in Mogadishu and elsewhere that flocked to their ranks. That they were able to pay wages to these indigent youth also helped their mission (for the time being).

With that calculated, tactical move, the second tier warlords gained two things: 1) control over the Islamic Courts, which were previously clan based neighborhood-watch outfits, and 2) untold resources in terms of more robust fund-raising capabilities that tapped into Middle Eastern petrodollars from wealthy individuals (and/or groups). With that they mustered the ability to recruit unlimited number of boy-soldiers from throughout the country, across clan-lines, whom they would soon use as canon fodder.

This was a brilliant but deadly shift from the basic warlord style of doing dirty business. It was masterminded by half-a-dozen guys belonging to the same sub, sub-clan (practically, distant cousins) who have henceforth all adopted the title "sheikh" for themselves. They include Sheikh Dahir Aways, Sheikh Inda'ade, and Sheikh A'yrow. Whether Sheikh Abdiqasim Salad (the former TNG President) is the actual mastermind in all of these, as has been alleged, is a matter of some dispute.

Yet the humiliating defeat of the first tier warlords in the hand of the now religious second tier warlords was a good omen for the TFG for two reasons: 1) The oppression of the first tier warlords was removed from Mogadishu and other points south, and 2) these previously arrogant tyrants were forced to sheepishly come back to the fold and pledge allegiance to the TFG.

## Religious Smokescreen

In a fairly quick turnaround, the battered city of Mogadishu had come under new management. The hastily unified Union of Islamic Courts was the 'new sheriff in town'. As it began to preside over the sprawling but substantially destroyed ancient city, the UIC also began to make rather encouraging statements concerning their future plans.

They disavowed political ambition to rule the country by religious fiat, like the Taliban in Afghanistan. They stated that they recognized the TFG as the sole legitimate Somali national government. They also indicated willingness to negotiate with the Transitional Federal Government regarding the modalities by which they could work together in a cooperative spirit. But they also insisted on issuing the one demand they knew would be a deal-breaker, namely to end Ethiopian support for the TFG.

The TFG was not about to disavow its friendship with Ethiopia. This gave the UIC the excuse it needed to spread its military and political wings. Confrontation was now all but inevitable.

Thus the positive promises the UIC has made in past weeks had evaporated along with the *hagaayo* rains of Mogadishu. Out of the blue, various self-styled, previously unknown UIC "sheikhs" began to make steady stream of contradictory statements, ranging from conciliatory messages to outright threats against the TFG; all within a short span of time. But the group's real intentions have become clear at their first scheduled meeting with the TFG in Khartoum, in late June, 2006.

In that meeting, the TFG was represented by a high-level delegation that included the President, the Prime Minister and the then Speaker of the Transitional Parliament. By contrast the Union of Islamic Courts sent unknown figures that were not in a position to make decisions of any kind. From that point forward, relations between the two sides went down a slippery slope with the UIC becoming ever more belligerent in tone as well as in action. The second Khartoum meeting a few weeks later was a *pro forma* gathering for which no one had high expectations. If anything the UIC was by now openly threatening to and dismissive of the TFG.

And, those were no idle threats. Within the span of one year, the Prime Minister was targeted for assassination three times, while visiting his hometown—Mogadishu. But it is not clear whether these criminal acts were the handiwork of the militant, al-Shabaab wing of the UIC or irate elements still loyal to the trounced first tier warlords.

Meanwhile, in another ominous development, the UIC's ragtag but highly motivated militia was on the move on several fronts. As they quickly consolidated power with the capture of a number of towns throughout the South including the strategic port city of Kismaayo, which they took over in late October, 2006, they laid firm plans to take control of the entire country.

Earlier, in September of that year, President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed too narrowly escaped an attempt at his life by a suicide bomber (employing a satanic technique hitherto unknown to Somalis). Further, the advancing forces of the UIC, who, flush with several victories under their belt, were poised to capture the town of Buurhakaba on their way to taking Baidhabo, the temporary seat of the federal institutions; all the while calling for a "holy war" not only against the TFG but also its supporter, the neighboring country of Ethiopia.

Buoyed by rebellious exhortations from senior UIC leaders like Sheikh Dahir Aways, Sheikh Indha 'Ade, Sheikh Turki among others along with the standard blood-curling statements from the likes of Ayman al-Zawahiri of al-Qa'eda, soon foreign fighters were flocking to what they called the "Somali Jihad". But, of all the external assistance provided to the UIC military campaign—and that adds up to a tidy sum—none has been more critical than the openhanded logistical support given to it by the rogue state of Eritrea. Now with its forces mobilized and ready for battle, Baidhabo was squarely at the crosshairs of an impending UIC offensive.

When the battle was joined in early December, 2006, the TFG had its back to the wall. There was very little room to maneuver. Naturally, as any legitimate authority would have done in a similar predicament, the TFG asked its neighbor, Ethiopia, for help in thwarting a clano-religious insurrectionist movement that was absolutely determined to seize the reins of political power in Somalia, by any means necessary.

As advertised, the UIC unleashed its frontal attack. However, due in large measure, to the Ethiopian support, TFG forces were able to route the UIC militia. Within days of their attack on the Transitional Federal Government, the UIC's remnants, including a substantial number of foreign fighters, were fleeing in all directions. But the militant cadre of their militia, especially the unrestrained al-Shabaab wing, vowed to continue waging their jihad by other means. It appears that they have since settled on a 'hit and run' campaign that has largely victimized civilians but also killed a small number of TFG security personnel as well as members of the Ugandan and Ethiopian peace-keeping forces in Mogadishu.

What is lost in all of these conflagrations is the exceedingly deleterious impact that the continuing violence has been having on the lives of the already traumatized citizens of Mogadishu and its vicinity. Many in this population are at wit's end. They have literally lived through nearly two decades of uninterrupted random violence and gangland killings. To what end? No one really knows! Only that the perpetrators seem to show no concern for the suffering of non-combatants including women, children and the elderly.

### **Liberation via Besieged Asmara**

The leaders of the opposition, in a frantic effort to respond to the successful National Reconciliation Conference, hastily arranged their own "Liberation" Conference in Asmara (September, 2007). It was attended by less than 300 members of the now rudderless opposition, including self-seeking sympathizers. They chose Asmara, the capital of the pariah state of Eritrea. Eritrea is a bankrupt little country that has been turned into a police state by its megalomaniacal dictator, Isaias Afowerki. Its claim to fame is to house all the rebel gangs from throughout Africa. (The country is also at war footing with all its neighbors).

The conference was by all accounts a total failure. It was dominated by religious warlords in religious garb. The gathering however did achieve one of its goals: to provide the Eritrean dictator Afowerki with an expanded forum for his ritualistic denunciations of his archenemy, Ethiopia. Beyond that it boiled down to the remnants of the Somali opposition stating in an increasingly muffled voice: "we exist". But their situation is akin to that proverbial conundrum: "if a tree falls in a forest and no one hears it, does it make noise"?

Unfortunately their reiteration of their objective to resort to acts of terror in pursuit of political ends opens another sad chapter for the people of Mogadishu. Because the opposition's narrow-minded call to arms would only translate to more destruction for ordinary Somalis, who will needlessly suffer the consequences of the opposition's misdeeds. Made up of an ideologically heterogeneous group, the self-styled crowd that gathered in Asmara is united by one thing above all else: their strong hatred for the TFG leaders and Ethiopia because of its support for the TFG, not for the false charge of "invasion".

Interestingly enough, the opposition's few wealthy benefactors in the Middle East that are bank-rolling what is essentially a Somali on Somali fratricidal war, do know the difference between the TFG and the UIC. They know for example that the TFG is not only the sole legitimate authority in the country but that it presents the best hope for Somalia getting its house in order. They also know that UIC is an insurrectionist group using religious zeal to achieve political ends.

But what they seem to want more than anything else is pit actors in a great geopolitical game of theirs in which Somalis do not have a direct stake.

That is why the Somali opposition group's best option is to abandon their jihad against their own people and organize a political party inside Somalia. This is the legitimate way to compete for public support in the form of votes not by snuffing the precious lives of innocent Somalis. The indiscriminate use of the fire arms, road-side bombs and contract killings, as has been their wont thus far, would not lead the opposition to 'the promised land'. It will only delay the inevitable: the Somali people's inexorable unity and shared destiny, the safeguarding of which is the key to veritable justice and genuine national development.

## Inter-clan Harmony, not Clan Hegemony

The political problems facing Somalia today are not really about politics in the classical sense of the word. They are about a cruel version of the old clan quarrels that had been carried out intermittently in the Somali country-side over grazing lands and access to water wells for nearly millennia.

During the two generations of nominal independence, Somalis saw their government or what passes for one as both the place for best pasture and the most reliable watering hole (for the urban elite of course). Hence, the fierce inter-clan and intra-clan struggles of the past 20 years. The underlying theme (clan dynamics) of these conflicts has not changed since before inauguration of the first Republic in 1960; only the tactics of the warriors of the day had varied from time to time.

The clan factor though less pronounced was present during the reign of the civilian administrations (1960-1969). Clanism was similarly ubiquitous during the 21-year military dictatorship (1969-1990). The civil wars (1991-2002) were predicated entirely on perceived clan grievances erupting into the open. They were also about the rapacious desire by some to grab a bigger share of the largesse they had always associated with controlling the levers of power at the national government level.

Predictably, in all those situations, the pursuit of clan-based politics had led only to dead-end, underdevelopment and destruction. Hence, the imperative for a paradigm shift in Somali polity. In this regard, inter-clan relations must be harmonized to the degree that no group would be foolish enough to seek clan hegemony. Neither the borrowed ideological veneers of the past governments nor the religious fanaticism by many in today's opposition hold answers for country's political problems. Instead, Somalis should consider modernizing what the old anthropologists called Somalia's unique 'pastoral democracy'; known for egalitarianism and fidelity to unfettered freedom of expression. The one proviso should be adherence to the Islamic moral and ethical code, which can be achieved through knowledge and liberality; not by force.

## Conclusion

The TFG has many opponents and they are not all wrong. But the Somali people need to get their collective heads from the clouds of clan politics, where they have been stuck for such a long

time. As the Greek stoic philosopher Epictetus observed, "It is impossible for a man to learn what he thinks he already knows".

Somalis should stop acceding to the triple yokes that characterize clanism: fear, mutual suspicion, and oppression, which are universally agreed to be inimical to the nation's well-being. Indeed, there needs to be a far-reaching change that seeks to promote a different, more cooperative outlook and mutuality towards a society where all are empowered and none are disenfranchised. To this end, the role of government in the people's lives must be limited to the few things that governments can do well, including national defense (from enemies foreign or domestic) and the safeguarding the rule of law. Such transformation would engender unity of purpose on the path to freedom from want, oppression, and ignorance.

Though far from perfect, TFG is in the best position in a long time to unite the Somali nation towards peaceful reconciliation that would, given a chance, unleash phenomenal social development. After years of "observing" from the sidelines, today the whole international community is behind the TFG's effort to restore Somalia to its rightful place as a peace-loving, dynamic nation. The United States, the UN, the EU, the AU, the Arab League are all on record supporting the TFG. This represents a golden opportunity, which Somalis must not squander, yet again.

The blind obedience, on the part of many in the opposition, to the backward system of judging individuals and communities on the basis of clan origin must cease to exist. Likewise the abuse of religious and democratic ideals at the altar of clannish expediency must end. Lastly, once Somalis liberate themselves, by their sandal straps, from the debilitating burden of *chronic clanism* and replace it with representative form government, the nation is sure to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and beyond.

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