

Is Clan a Constrain or an Opportunity for Political Development?

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Somalis are wary of clan and clan politics. In the name of clan or kinship unit (used interchangeably here) they have committed abominable acts of great atrocities against one another, to the extent of defying any sense of imagination. However depending on how one make use of it, like a double edged knife, it can cut both ways. In the following exposition I will show how, once upon a time, clan politics had provided the basis for winning Somali freedom from colonial rule and, how later, it was used by the civilian regime to foster national unity and provide the basis for a democratic rule in Somalia. I will conclude by offering my observation and recommendations to current government(s) or any other government aspiring to rule Somalia in future.

Social Contours of Political Parties and Political Participation before Independence

In 1950, the British who ruled the whole Somali peninsula, after the end of the Second War, relinquished their rule. The UN thereafter offered the Italian Government Southern Somalia to rule as a Trust Territory. By then however party political activities had already been underway throughout the country. Somali Youth League S.Y.L., a party that had been formed in 1947, in anticipation of the arrival of the Four Power Commission of Investigation, had supplanted the Somali Youth Club S.Y.C. as an active political organisation, aspiring for a national following. As a political party fighting for independence in the south, S.Y.L. had the most modern progressive features, since it was quite secular in its political outlook, as could be seen from its four-point programme. In this programme, a call for an eradication of clan politics was made, and nowhere, in this programme, is the word religion taken up for any reason whatsoever. Besides S.Y.L., other political organisations had also been formed, all of them competing for political space of their own, within the Somali political arena. The first challenge to face these organisations as viable political entities, having well defined goals and enough followers, came in 1946 when the Four Power Commission Investigation was formed by the UN and later sent to Somalia to consult with the Somali people about their future political aspirations. S.Y.L, majority of whose members and leaders came mainly from two clan families of Darood and Hawiye (this not excluding other lineages) called for a unitary and a centralised state; S.Y.L. had displayed a desire not to have Somalia given back to Italy. Another political organisation with a sizable following was Hizbia Digil Mirifle, belonging

mainly to a constellation of people, otherwise known for their tribal affiliation as Hizbia Dighil e Mirifle. Initially the Dighil e Mirifle maintained a political view of a quite nebulous nature. On one hand it joined a group made up of different associations, including those that belonged to Italians, Indians and Arabs, otherwise known collectively as “Somalia Conference,” demanding that the territory be placed for 30 years under the Italian Trusteeship in preparation for the independence of the country. On the other hand, when pressed to define the limit or the extent of the trusteeship, the representative of this organisation said that he had in mind only the territories belonging to Dighil e Mirifle grouping of people. In 1958, however, the organisation changed its name to Hizbia Destour Mutaqil Somal, H.D.M.S and also acquired nationalist credentials, while calling for a federal constitution. The change of name was in keeping with the law requiring political parties to avoid using names that could have tribal association.

In 1950 Somalia became a UN Trust Territory to be managed by Italy for an envisaged period of ten years. This important episode in the political history of the territory had ringed the bell to remind different parties to start the final struggle for the Somali independence. In 1950, Territorial Council, which as a body of administration had an advisory function only, was established; its appointed members came from tribal leaders. In 1954 and 1956, the first municipal and the first legislative assembly elections were held respectively. In the later case, this election resulted in a government responsible to the legislature, and had also led to the dissolution of the Territorial Council. In both instances, however, the elections were held under universal adult male suffrage. Following these elections, two more elections were held again. These were the municipal and the legislative assembly elections of 1958 and 1959 respectively.

Several political parties, apart from S.Y.L. jockeyed for positions in all these municipal and legislative assembly elections, which took place during that period. One of the marking features of these political organisations had been their orientation based on kinship identity. Even though they had exceeded a dozen or so, here only a few prominent ones will be named. As a political party S.Y.L. was a party with a wide support throughout the region. However it had its leadership mainly drawn from members of two clan-families of Darod and Hawiye. In the case of H.D.M.S this party drew its supporters mainly from Dighil and Mirifle. Greater Somali League G.S.L. was a splinter group from S.Y.L; its leader, Haji Mohamed Hussein, was Rer-Hamar, a native of Mogadishu, and was once a president of S.Y.L. G.S.L. was

supported by some Rer-Hamar but also had the support of Darood, both of Mogadishu and Kismayu. Then there was the Liberal Somali Youth Party, known in Italian as Partito Liberale Giovanni Somalo, P.L.G.S. This party drew its followers from the Abgal branch of the Hawiye clan family and had also gained support from members of the Dir clan family that live in areas south of Mogadishu. The Somali National Union, S.N.U, known formerly as Union of Benadir Youth, was yet another important political organisation that took part in elections. This organisation drew its followers from two major coastal cities of Mogadishu and Merka. Other lesser organisations had also made their presence felt; including Marehan Union and Somali African Union. All of these parties demanded independence for the country. However, while S.Y.L. fought for a centralised and a unitary state, it was also western oriented in its political outlook. Unlike S.Y.L, H.D.M.S, called for a federal state in Somalia. G.S.L. had its ideology clearly stated. Not only did the party stand for a unitary state, it was also quite vehement in its wish to see all Somalis united under one nation. Its political agenda was left oriented as it called for closer working relationship between Somalia and Egypt.

In the northern part of the country, otherwise known as British Somaliland, some form of political associations existed since 1935. It was not however until 1945 that a formal organisation called Somali National Society S.N.S. was established and which later merged with some of the political societies present in the regions before evolving finally in 1951 into becoming a very active and effective organisation, acquiring the name, Somali National League S.N.L. Prior to this however in 1945, branches of S.Y.L had already been established in the region. In the north, the return of Haud (an important grazing land) from Ethiopian rule in 1954, acted as a catalyst in raising the level of Somali political manoeuvres in the region. In 1955 consequently attempts were made to create an umbrella organisation, National United Front (N.U.F.) in which all other associations including different political parties could make use of in order to channel their common ambition to fight for the return of the Haud to the British Protectorate. When the organisation failed in its ambition, it lost its importance. Its constituent members left the coalition and subsequently reverted to their own independent programmes. N.F.U. continued to operate, however, as an organisation that drew its major support from Habar Jella branch of the Isaaq clan family. Michael Mariano, a Habar Jeela himself, who was a Christian with an impeccable moral and nationalist record, retained the leadership of the organisation. Like in the south, all forms of political organisations in the north drew their support mainly from their respective kinship units. While S.Y.L. with its

roots in the south was able to gain its major support mainly from Dulbahante and Warsangeli, both belonging to the Harti confederacy of the larger Darood clan family, S.N.L. drew its support from Habar Yonis, Idagalle, and Saad Muse, the latter being a section within Habar-Awal sub-section of the Isaaq clan family; Isaaq as a clan family is in majority in the north. In 1960, a new political party known as the United Somali Party USP was formed. This party brought together various desperate non-Isaaq groups living in the north. These are the Dulbahante and Warsangeli (Harti Darod) and the Gudebursi (Dir) of the northwest in order to counter balance the weight of S.N.L in the political arena

Social Contours of Political Parties and Political Participation after Independence

On the eve of independence in 1960, political parties, both in the south and the north, had started to line up themselves in a struggle to better their position before the day of independence. Thus in the following election of February 1960, in the north, S.N.L. won a resounding victory against other contending parties, having won twenty out of thirty-three seats. Next in the line came the United Somali Party, U.S.P. with its twelve seats. In spite of the National United Front N.U.F. having joined forces with the S.Y.L. the party came last in this contest, with only one seat to its credit. After the election victory, the two parties with majority seat formed a coalition, leaving N.U.F. candidate out in the cold. In the south, the struggle for independence continued unabated. S.Y.L. continued to garner its major support from both Hawiye and Darod. Notwithstanding their defeat by S.Y.L in municipal and legislative assembly elections, other parties, such as H.D.M.S and G.S.L. had offered a spirited fight against the dominance of S.Y.L., even though in the end, S.Y.L. was able to co-opt some important members belonging to H.D.M.S to its ranks. It is quite true to say that on the eve of independence clan positions as expressed through party political affiliation was complete.

It was against this background that independence was achieved in the country in July 1960 through the act of the union that brought together the two legislative assemblies of the north and the south to form the National Assembly of the Republic, meanwhile electing Adan Abdulle Usman as Provisional President of the Republic. Independence and unification brought its own challenges to the government and the people of Somalia. The election of the first President of the Republic was one of those challenges that happily could be overcome, when with a unanimous votes, in the joint session of the two legislatures, Adan Abdulle Osman was elected in favour of his opponent Sheikh Ali Jumale who, like the newly elected

President, belonged to a Hawiye clan family. At the same time, a referendum calling for the ratification of the union was proposed and was envisaged for taking place after one year. Although during this time, party politics remained a major form of political participation for common people, in terms of voting for the party of their choice, the period is however far more remembered for elite political decision making in the affairs of the nation, which could be achieved through a spirit of compromise, than anything else. After the election of the president, it was required that a government representing overlapping and competing identities should be in place.

The government had to reflect the dominant interest of the winning political parties, both of the north and the south; it had to balance the interest of various kinship units and above all it had to reflect and consider the interest of the different regions of the country. When the Prime minister, Abdirashid Ali Shermarke, a Darod, who himself was a compromise candidate announced his fourteen men cabinet, everyone thought it was a quite a representative body. Among the fourteen cabinet ministers, four were from the Northern Region, belonging to S.N.L. and U.S.P. Among some of the portfolios offered to them are: the important position of Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and Minister of Education. Prior to this however, on July 7, the National Assembly had elected, Jama Abdullahi Galib, an Isaaq from north, and a prominent member of the S.N.L., to become the president of the National Assembly. The position of the Prime Minister and the President went to the southerners, but representing different kinship interest of Darood and Hawiya respectively. The National Assembly thought the cabinet was quite large and hence demanded a change. Consequently on 14 August a new cabinet composed of 12 ministers was declared which, like the previous cabinet, attempted to balance the clan interest. The head of the police was from the north, while a southerner became the head of the army. Some of the most important aspects of the new national affairs the civilian government had to contend with were how to bring about the integration of the country in the areas of political, judiciary and economic as well as social and cultural administration.

In every single effort made in the above-mentioned direction, it required the spirit of compromise to prevail among members of the elite in order to bring about the needed change. In the field of education, the elite from the south, it seemed were willing to allow English to become the language of administration and education. Some of the early agricultural development projects took place in the north at Tog Wajale. In the early 60s fissures began to

appear in the body politics of the nation, and this could have been seen as a sign that the north had no confidence in the union. The attempted coup by the northern officers in their base in the north and the rejection of the referendum required for the provisional constitution to become a law in the country have been cited as examples of the fissures in the Somali body politics. In both instances however, since the northerners were involved on either side, hence these events should not be seen as a collective expression of their verdict on the state of the union. Attempts were made to keep the rule of law to the best possible means. Nowhere is this desire better expressed than in the events that had followed the attempted coup of the northerners in 1961. The coup makers were apprehended following their coup attempt but given all the right of defence by lawyers flown from outside to do the defence job. Perhaps the one thing for which the civilian government would be remembered for a long time is its commitment to political development. From 1960 to 1969, no less than four general elections had taken place in the country. The civilian government made a record for making Somalia the first country in Africa to reject an incumbent president and replacing him with a new one.

In the general election of 1967, for the first time the Prime Minister came from the north. Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal, an Isaaq from the north, had come to this position through a long political detour. In the first government he occupied a position of defence minister before resigning, and thereafter leading the opposition members from the S.N.L., who were outside the government, into coalition with some disgruntled southerners to form in May 1963 a new party called Somali National Congress. By 1967 however, this party had become a spent force. Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal had come full circle by becoming a member of the ruling government, and an important member, at that. No doubt as a Prime Minister he might have placated the concern the northerners (read, members of Isaaq kinship unit) had about their fear of marginalisation in the affairs of the nation. In matters of external affairs, he had a rare foresight to know the danger of pursuing irredentist claims. What with the whole world, and especially African countries, calling for the need to show respect for international boundaries, which Somalia was bent on changing. With this in mind he attempted to negotiate a peaceful settlement to problems that Somalia had with its neighbours, Ethiopia and Kenya. We would never know what the outcome of his policies would have been, since his government was overthrown in October 1969.

End of Pluralism

On coming to power through a successful coup of October 1969, the military regime did one major thing before embarking on its own political enterprise. By abrogating the constitution that allowed political parties to function in the country, it made sure that the emerging pluralism went to its early grave. The results of this policy measure had been that it was no longer possible for political needs of various kinship units, real or imaginary, to be mediated through someone of their own choice. At the national level, it meant that the prevailing forms of elite political negotiations representing kinship interest as the basis of ruling the state would cease to exist. As for the fate of the said political elites, who also were legislators, these were substituted for a body made up of 25 army men, to be known as Supreme Revolutionary Council. As a body its allegiance was to its own members. With time however, Siad Barre emerged as the sole power.

Up and until 1974, the military regime under Siad Barre had made great achievements. Noteworthy among those achievements are, the promotion of the Somali orthography, the resettlement in the south of the draught victims from the north, the successful fight against the encroachment of sand dunes into the farm lands etc. To give a form of legitimacy to the military rule, Barre devised a political system in which Somalia appeared to have a ruling party (Somali Socialist Democratic Party) and a parliament, known as People's Assembly, fully equipped with all kinds of legislative paraphernalia. The last three years of the 1970s were very crucial in so far as the political history of Somalia is concerned. Several things happened in succession at this time. It was during this time that the war with Ethiopia ended in the defeat of the Somali army. The defeat was followed with the state murder of senior military officials. This in turn caused grievances to rise in some officers who then attempted a coup and failed. That the officers who attempted the coup were said to belong to a single kinship unit of Majertein, convinced Barre that this was not an accident. In retaliation Barre executed all but one of those involved in mounting the failed coup. The man who escaped the fire squad was none other than Abdullahi Yusuf, the former President of the Transitional Government of Somalia who went into exile in Ethiopia, and from there, in 1981, helped to form Somali Salvation Democratic Front (S.S.D.F.) Barre retaliated by resorting to a scorched earth policy in Yusuf's home area. In 1980 to the surprise of everyone, Barre dissolved the

Assembly and thereafter had the country ruled by the Supreme Revolutionary Council, once again. He also did away with the newly formed cabinet.

In April 16th 1981 Somali National Movement, representing the interest of the Issaq clan family was established and had the support of the Ethiopia. In 1988 yet another movement, Somali National Congress, representing this time the interest of the Hawiye came into being. In the following years all those movements would put pressure on the regime. With all those movements waging wars, it was just a matter of time before the government would fall in 1991.

Observations and Recommendations

Observations

The democratic civilian government had been criticised allegedly for corruption, tribalism, and especially for not being sincere in running the national elections in a fair manner. The election of 1969 is often taken as an example to indicate the state hopelessness in the Somali politics. The proliferation of parties contesting election is further given as a testimony to Somali political failures. Most of these criticism are given without taking into consideration the historical reality of the country and its people, and therefore quite unfair. In 1960s, Somalia was a country with no working class; its intelligentsia was in its nascent stage of development. More than 80% of its population pursued a pastoralist way of life. The largest city was Mogadishu, with a population that was less than one million. It is strange that given all these factors, from where do the critics of the civilian government think the state could have drawn its source of mobilisation? What the civilian government did in terms of political development was to use the available building blocks of kinship units to erect a national political structure. Some writers are fond of saying that in the 1969 general election, only one person remained in opposition to the government, all others having joined the bandwagon of the state party rule. Far from being a sign of failure, this is a demonstration that democracy can be practised in more than one way. After all, Westminster Abbey is a form of democracy, but not all democracies in the world are made in the shape of Westminster Abbey. Remember, Abdirizaq Haji Hussein was not the first person to embody the struggle of one man determined to oppose the dominant political party in 1969 at the Somali National Assembly. This honour should go to Michael Mariano, who in 1960 was the sole opposition member in

the Northern Legislative Assembly; and this did not mean that it was the end of the northern Somali political history. With one man in opposition, the northern political parties went on to form the union. No reason to think otherwise, if the military regime had not done away with this Somali political experimentation, having a vibrant but loquacious form of democratic practices as its trade mark; Somali style democracy. The civilian regime had tried to promote a genuine policy of non-alignment. In this way it succeeded in not allowing Somalia to become an ideological and strategic battleground for the superpowers, which the military regime allowed it to be. Furthermore, the civilian government initiated a policy of good neighbourliness, which was not kept by the military regime. With all these things going on for her could have the Somali people, ruled on the basis of the compromising spirit of its various kinship units, ever to meet with the most horrible fate that has been its lot for all these years, if, let us say, the civilian government had remained in power? This is a hypothetical question and, of course, no one can hazard any answer, either way. Yet it is quite likely that this same question might have crossed the minds of some of observers of the Somali politics.

Recommendations

It is quite unfortunate that the Somali state, which in 1960 had been created and sustained through a compromising spirit of its kinship units, should go under because of the fight they had to wage against Siad Barre's government, and later among themselves, each in a bid to emerge victorious in a struggle for a state rule, meanwhile using the winner takes all political strategy as a means for ruling the state. Political activities of the kinship units can be either constructive or destructive. It is constructive when the spirit of compromise between and among kinship units is available, and when the struggle is based within a common legal framework, and on shared values, as well as when the end objective of the struggle is to have and maintain the Somali state as shown above. It is destructive if, however, none of these preconditions are met, as this could be witnessed from the past recent political history of Somalia. The past civilian government had satisfied each of the above-mentioned conditions. On the other hand, the military regime had ignored them, relying on force instead to run the state, thereby leading to its early demise. Various Somali kinship military outfits opposed to the military regime from their positions inside Ethiopia have also contributed in no small measure to the destruction of the state.

Since 1991 great deal of efforts have been made to bring the Somali state back to life without any success. Despite the shady a questionable nature by which the newly formed government has come to life, many Somalis will still like to give it the benefit of the doubt and hope, against hope, that it will not have the same ending result like its predecessors. In Djibouti the formula for sharing power had taken into consideration the role of kinship units as the basis for finding a workable solution to Somali problem. This formula has been made to draw its inspiration from the now magic number of 4.5, which as a number is said to allegedly stand for various kinship units at the level of the clan family. I can appreciate the state of urgency under which the Djibouti Conference had been made to work in order for it to come up with some sort of solution to problems in Somalia.

One of the outcomes of the Djibouti Conference had been the establishment of a Parliament composed of legislative members whose number is upward of 500. Currently their role of representations happens to exist at the mere level of abstraction. However, it is well to bear in mind that as an arrangement of this nature, this will have a short lived expediency, and hence could exist only up to a certain period of time, beyond which it may fail in its planned objectives, as it is true to say that no government anywhere exists in vacuum. At the moment, such a large body may not face any immediate danger of having to collapse under its own weight; the danger will however present itself in the near future, especially if the government, in this case, will prove to have no conceptual understanding required for administrative and political rule of the nation.

Kinship units in Somalia occupy well defined space at the level of sub clan units. This may not be true in the case of a clan or a clan family unit where their home may be found to encompass more than territorial borders of one nation, as indeed it is true for one or two Somali clan families. Therefore, if the recent appointed legislative members of the assembly are to perform their work effectively, they will be required to have in place well defined constituencies for these units to represent at the parliament. A similar arrangement will be required as a mechanism for administrative purposes. Such arrangement may result, let us say, in a clan family unit with a minimum number of twenty sub clan units to acquire altogether twenty representatives in the parliament at the same time; multiply this number to include other four major family clan units and you will have eighty members. Based on the same principle the rest of the other group will be required to also elect their representatives at the level of sub clan unit. When every known Somali clan family will have its representations at

the level of the sub clan unit, the name for the formula under which they choose to share political resources will have no any meaning whatsoever. In that case 4.5 will simply be a number. This as an arrangement will also help to correct the anomaly that had been faced by the civilian government, which although it recognised the role of clan in political affairs of the nation it failed to delineate a clear boundary line in terms of representations for these social units. As a result a strong sub clan unit C within clan unit B belonging to clan family A had sometimes rode roughshod over other social units who though they belonged to the same clan family unit A nevertheless belonged to different clan and sub clan units. This had often taken place in the past civilian regime - a fact that not only tarnished its image but caused widespread conflicts to take place within members of the same clan.

To achieve its objective in its political and administrative rule of the nation, the present government must immediately set up commissions to map out political constituencies as well as administrative districts. While the nature of the political constituencies should be made to correlate with the social contours of the sub clan unit, the unit of the district will have to involve one or two more members of the sub clan units in the same administrative district, since it is quite possible that more than one sub clan unit will be found to have their home in the same area. Patterning the space to correlate with physical administrative units, on one hand, and to correlate social contours with political constituency, on the other hand, is the best way to elicit and encourage participation at the grass root levels. Political candidacy based on clan representations cannot be underestimated. Once elected to the parliament, not only will candidates represent the interest of their kinship units there but, within the scope of their parliamentary role, they will help to promote stability by way of validating the legitimacy of the state in the minds of their respective kinship units, and hence provide stability to the political system of nation. Although each sub clan unit will have the right to select its own candidates, these will have to contest election within the parameters provided for by the same sub clan unit, in order to ensure that the best candidate wins. Part of the criteria for determining the qualifications required by the candidate to run for election will have to be determined by the state, such as the candidate's level of education, however, traditional criteria for choosing candidates, such as moral background as well as knowledge of the Somali culture, will be the work of the elders.

No discussion on the nature of the candidacy to the parliament will be complete unless the issue of religion and who will articulate its interest in the parliament is discussed. Kinship and

religion are two social issues which are of great importance to Somalis, to the extent that, just as wars have been waged in the name of kinship units, so too have wars been equally waged in the name of religion. Notable among those groups fighting in the name of religion is Al Shabaab. While I have no issue to pick with Al Shabab, I do not share their zealous approach to issues of politics in Somalia. By all means let Al Shabab, or any other organisations with claims to Islamic affiliations, have a role in Somali politics, but please let that role be one based on democratic choice of candidates to the parliament. This can easily be achieved by allowing each kinship unit to allocate a third of their seat to religious candidates. If, for example, in such arrangement, a sub clan b will vote for someone having Al Shabab religious affiliations so be it. Religious candidates elected on the sub clan ticket will have a special role to play in the future bi cameral parliament of Somalia; they will have their own special house to discuss issues of religion and recommend them to the other house for passing. They will also have to discuss issues sent to them from the other house for discussion and recommendations. In this way the two houses will supplement and compliment each other's efforts, and in this way ensures that their esteem for each other will be enhanced.

Conclusion

Recent incidents of conflicts in the Somali political history, have been associated with a quest for winning political resources, as different kinship groups have fiercely opposed each other in order to win political resources to benefit their own respective units, and also make sure that the same resources are denied to other competing groups. And like in conflict situations of the past eras when, as an important resource, water had been the focus of competition, and when this could only be had by the strongest party, kinship units fighting for political resources today have aspired for the same outcome in their competition. What the competing groups have failed to understand is that today they are no longer fighting to have the first right of access to a waterhole, and therefore their waterhole strategy could not be duplicated within the context of their present-day competition for political dominance of the state.

The stakes are much higher today than ever before, and this is the reason why none of the kinship units has so far been able to emerge victorious in the struggle for a political dominance. If the recent kinship politics of predatory nature that had been holding Somalis to ransom, for almost two decades now, is to be relegated to the dust bin of history, their

political ambitions must be recognised and through a democratic processes make those dreams come true. The advantages of legally empowering kinship units through constitutional means are many.

Firstly such arrangement will deny any role to self appointed kinship leaders who while speaking for their own interest pretend to speak those of their kinship units. Secondly genuine kinship leadership legally empowered will have the support of all members belonging to the same kinship unit. Thirdly the whole process will help involve all members of the same kinship unit in having a say on those matters affecting their lives. The importance of kinship units can't be underestimated, particularly because of their beliefs, attitudes and feelings that are crucial for promoting loyalties and pattern of participation in the national affairs.

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