



A Letter from Mogadishu: The birth and burial of Somali Nationalism

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Introduction:

Mogadishu epitomizes all that is good and bad about the Somali people: it is the pride of Somali history and the cradle of Somali nationalism that ultimately brought the independence and unity of former Italian Somaliland and British Somaliland- an act that was hoped would lead to the fulfilment of Greater Somalia.

But [Mogadishu is also indelibly associated with the worst of Somalia's history](#): those in Mogadishu who ousted



President Mohamed Barre and his government wanted to grab power at any cost. And indeed they did but at what cost!! The overthrow of the Somali Government in 1991 led immediately to the collapse of the Somali State with untold dire consequences with almost half the Somali population either killed, starved, ethnic-cleansed, internally displaced or forced to flee the country and seek refuge in foreign countries. And Mogadishu itself has paid the price to the point of total destruction.

Apart from the human and physical damage, no less calamitous is the demise of Somali nationalism, the glue that held together the Somali people from different clans and different region. Its passing has ushered the nation's fragmentation into clannism, bogus federalism and secession. Revival of the State and nation could only come back with the revival of Somali nationalism. That, however, would only be possible when Somalia has honest patriotic visionary leaders which so far has eluded it. And as long as this remains the case, support from the international community is unlikely to bear much fruit as we have seen over

the recent years since this federal government took office. It is against this background that I paid a visit to Mogadishu for the first time after an absence dating back to 1990.

A return to the homeland

a. Landing at Mogadishu Airport

There are many shocks awaiting a Somali diaspora returning to Mogadishu for the first time since the collapse of the State in 1991. Landing at Mogadishu Airport (the old one) is the gateway, the window to Somalia and one's first eye opener. Even if one is aware that the once proud and independent nation has been brought down from its pedestal and torn apart by years of destruction, turmoil and anarchy at the hands of egregious warlords and their partisans, it is all the same shuttering when one sees with ones own eyes how familiar sites have changed beyond recognition.



What immediately strikes one on arrival at Mogadishu Airport is what looks like a country under occupation: the whole seaside overlooking the airport has been siphoned off by foreign interests and out of bounds for Somalis. This might be for security reasons given the fear of attacks from Al Shabaab. It is unlikely this carve-up of the sea side has been sanctioned by due process of law. At best, it might have been grabbed with a nod from the president (an autocrat who constitutionally is a figure head but has usurped the powers of the Prime Minister). And reflecting this foreign domination are the presence of African Union peacekeeping forces known as AMISOM who are conspicuous for their assertive intrusion posing as the new masters of the land.

Once you manage to get away from the airport (the old one), still as messy and chaotic as I had known it, one comes face to face with the status of the ordinary Somali people - confined to the outer periphery of the airport security zone, a sight reminiscent of the old colonial days. This is again justified on security grounds. Here and there, one finds skinny and miserable-looking Somali soldiers, once the pride of the nation. Their menial task is to control the entrance to the airport. Often unpaid for months, some are forced to swallow their pride and ask for money from arriving or departing passengers to feed themselves and their families. The contrast between them and their well-fed and well-paid AMISOM counterparts is tormenting.

b. Personal Safety in Mogadishu

I have been warned not to go to Mogadishu which has often been described by the foreign media as the most dangerous place in the world. Much to my surprise and relief, Mogadishu is in many ways much safer than Nairobi and other African capitals. Apart from Al Shabaab's occasional attacks on specific targets, you are otherwise less likely here to be killed, mugged or dispossessed of your car, mobile phone or wallet as often happens in Nairobi. But the years of intra-warlord fighting, subsequent foreign occupation(Ethiopia) and Al Shabaab's attacks on hotels and other public gatherings have left their mark. People prudently empty the streets and retire to their homes soon after sunset.



As such, there is little social life in contrast to the once vibrant lively city of bygone days. Little sign either of government security or law enforcement forces except for isolated checkpoints here and there in Makka El Mukkaram road, the main thoroughfare of the capital. Unlike elsewhere in the country, or among the diaspora abroad, Mogadishu's long-time residents rarely ever ask for your clan or care about it. They have seen it's evils, paid for it and now want to move and get on with their daily survival. (In Hargeisa, in contrast, that is the first thing they normally ask. And if you are from the south and your accent gives you away, you are likely to be denounced as Wallawayn!! Faqash!!,)

c. AMISOM: A burden or a blessing?

AMISOM is conspicuous for its omnipresence. Apart from its operations against Al Shabaab in the field, AMISOM soldiers here in the capital guard every Ministry, key Government officials, including the President and his palace. Somali soldiers when used are doubled by AMISOM ones. What this implies, rightly or wrongly, is that though they are able to do these tasks as well as if not better than AMISOM guards, Somali soldiers on their own are not trusted by those officials who need protection.

Other than being African, and with the exception of the Djibouti's contingent, there is little else that connect these AMISOM forces to Somalia, in terms of its language, religion and culture and history. Not surprisingly, they show little or no palpable empathy for this country

and its people other to earn money, do the minimum fighting required, and return to their country in one piece and richer. You can't blame them. Why should they die for Somalia?. Only Somali soldiers are duty bound to do so.

The feeling is mutual. Somalis' antipathy towards AMISOM is partly envy - that they are swamped with so much money that would otherwise be theirs; and partly anger - that these well-fed and well-paid soldiers at times rape poor innocent Somali girls. But their real dislike is reserved for the presence of contingents from neighbouring countries with whom Somalia has historical territorial disputes. These are seen by most Somalis as occupiers furthering their countries' designs on their country rather than contributing to its peace, unity and stability, objectives that do not serve their interests. For sometime in the past, Somalia drew a line at accepting so-called peacekeeping forces from Kenya and Ethiopia but the current leader, Hassan Sheikh, never one to defend national interest, has endorsed it.

d. The fight against Al Shabaab

After several years operational presence in southern Somalia, the only success AMISOM can claim in its favour, which perhaps is no mean achievement, is to have ended Al Shabaab's unchallenged control of almost all urban centres in Southern Somalia. But in some ways, that is a pyrrhic victory. It is not so much that Al Shabaab is defeated and towns "liberated". Al

Shabaab often makes tactical withdrawal from towns in the face of an approaching overwhelming firepower from its enemies. When guerrilla warfare is its modus operandi, it does not serve its interest to waste men and material in a conventional frontal battle they know they cannot win. But once AMISON forces "liberate" a town and settle down to their bases, Al Shabaab



simply returns, melts into the population and it is business as usual: extorting taxes (more successfully than the government in Mogadishu as people will tell you), recruiting fighters and mounting attacks against chosen targets.

Just as former President George Bush rashly and prematurely declared "Mission Accomplished" soon after his invasion of Iraq, only to rue it forever, President Hassan of Somalia, ever desperate to claim a success, has the proclivity to proclaim every now and then the imminent defeat of Al Shabaab, only for them to mount daring broad daylight attacks on his presidential Palace. The president was lucky in one occasion to escape death within a whisker. Al Shabaab's concerted and country-wide operations during the holy month of Ramadan, at one time overrunning an AMISON base, and killing over 70 Burundian soldiers,

does not look like a force that has been defeated notwithstanding the president's wishful thinking.

The truth is that neither side has been able to defeat the other- at least up to now. But for Al Ashaab, this failure to be defeated after several years by over 22,000 AMISOM forces, might be in itself victory for them. It's calculation and strategy could well be that time is on its side since AMISOM's mandate in Somalia cannot be renewed for ever and there must come a point when they have to leave Somalia for they cannot stay there for ever. And if by then Al Shabaab still remains undefeated, and there is no effective Somali government under a capable patriotic national leader with a strong national army to takeover from AMISOM - hopes that are presently not on the horizon - the whole AMISOM Mission would be an unmitigated failure that could have adverse repercussions.

e. The dearth of nationalism and leadership

One discovers in coming to Mogadishu after a long absence that Somali nationalism is at best dormant but more likely dead. This is not only in Mogadishu. Khatumo State of Somalia is the exception where people, still true to their Darwish heritage, cling to the national flag, defend and die for the union without material or moral support from Somalia's political establishment. On the country, the president had directly or indirectly supported Somaliland's secession by co-opting one of their leading secessionists as his foreign Minister when he took office; his unspoken message to Somaliland was clear: that their interests would be saved in his hands, an act which ensures him support as a quid pro quo from parliamentarians in Mogadishu hailing from the secessionist enclave. His generous concessions to them at the bilateral talks in Turkey and Djibouti speak for themselves.



At a recent meeting, President Ali Khalif of Khatumo State, lamenting the dearth of nationalism in the south to support Somali unity, said - looking President Hassan, the main culprit, straight in the eyes - that it was southerners who, through inaction or otherwise, are responsible if Somalia was to break up and not so much the secessionist enclave in Hargeisa. True to his usual self-defence when cornered, President Hassan took the microphone to reiterate his usual mantra that he is committed to the unity of Somalia. Actions of course speak louder than words and he would be judged accordingly.

If Khatumo is, for the president, his government, parliament and the wider southern public, a faraway place in the north - out of sight and out of mind - what about what is happening close to Mogadishu when major events calling for public and government reaction take place?.

That was the case when Kenya's security forces rounded up thousands of ethnic Somalis in Nairobi last year regardless of their citizenship and detained them in what amounted to a concentration camp - subjecting the detainees, including women and children, to cruel, degrading and inhumane ill-treatment. There was an outcry from human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch and even Kenya ones at these barbarities. And yet, hardly any protest from the public or the Government. On the contrary, the Somali President, his foreign minister at the time and the outgoing ambassador in Nairobi all tacitly supported Kenya's action much to the horror of UNHCR which was defending the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. It was the same thing when the Saudis were deporting last year tens of thousands of Somalis into Mogadishu airport, also in the most inhumane ways.

And inside the country, the very so-called peacekeeping AMISOM forces are sometimes committing atrocities against the defenceless Somali civilian population that they were meant to protect. Each time the AMISOM forces get a beating from Al Shabaab or fear one, they retaliate on the civilians in their midst. This happened in Bay region and is now happening repeatedly in Marka. They were supposed to win hearts and minds away from Al Shabaab but what they are doing could do exactly the opposite and make their mission counterproductive. What is painful is that the members of the Somali Federal Government, dependent on AMISOM for their own protection, has found it more prudent to sacrifice their people and look the other way. This indifference towards the plight of the people is not isolated: it happened, as I mentioned elsewhere, when Somalis were being deported from Kenya and Saudi Arabia last year.

The government's abdication to defend the unity of Somalia, not in words as President Hassan does but in action, and its failure to stand by the rights of its people inside and outside the country, only encourages the secessionists, Kenya and others that they have nothing to fear from a toothless Somali Government. Nationalism can not be revived at least for now when the country is saddled with the least nationalist leader Somalia ever had since independence for whom power for material gain is his preoccupation.

f. A government in name

A day in Mogadishu confirms what one already has heard of- that there is no functioning government worth its name. With the regions running their own affairs, President Hassan and his Prime Minister spend most of their time on trips inside and outside the country; and when in Mogadishu are preoccupied with endless meetings with clan delegations or individuals seeking favours, a bit of the cake, or jobs.

Almost all public services, like education and health, are in private hands. That also includes security, the one thing a government is supposed to provide its citizens. But not here in Mogadishu where President Hassan and his government themselves rely on AMISOM for their protection than provide one to the public. Under the circumstance, the public have to

fend for themselves. Hotels have their armed guards in military fatigues and often are the target of Al Shabaab. Ordinary people keep their guns in their cars or next to their beds. One similarity Mogadishu has with towns in the USA is the sale of guns openly in the streets. It is not as though the people of Mogadishu have developed love for the gun as they do in the USA. Here, it is kept for security reasons until there is a government that can keep the peace.

Administration of justice to enforce property rights is ad hoc, costly for ordinary people and when accessible goes at a snail's pace. One has to contend with giving bribes at every step in court proceedings. Despite frequent reassurances from the Mayor of Benadir and at times the President that people will get their occupied or misappropriated property, only a very small percentage, who can afford the costs, or are well-connected to the legal authority, manage to get back their property.

Few look to a Government that is now bankrupt to deliver services. Foreign government despairing of the rampant corruption provide whatever aid they fork out through other channels. That leaves the Port of Mogadishu as the main source of revenue for the government. And here, the President ensures that his needs, above all his love for gallivanting around the world, have the first call on these meagre resources. Most of these trips are many-wasting.

In February, to the amazement of the nation, the President had to attend the 40th anniversary of Tigrey People's Liberation Front in Maqale, north of Addis Ababa. People wondered whether he is out of touch with the needs of his people or else care about them?. What relevance, they asked, has attending the TPLF's 40th anniversary for his struggling bankrupt nation, more so when it's late head, Meles Zenawi, had committed war crimes and crimes against humanity against the Ogaden people?

This trip, like others, tells so much about the President's insensitivity to the plight of his people. It was undertaken at a time when thousands of government employees were unpaid for months with its adverse impact on the fledgling institutions of the State they serve. Many people in Mogadishu worry about what sort of country president Hassan will leave behind if at all he leaves office, given his determination to remain in office by hook or by crook- not least by bribing the current corrupt parliamentary deputies as he did when he was first "elected".

g. Ali Baba and his thieves

Government corruption did not start with the current leaders. Their predecessors in the transitional governments have in varying degrees embezzled public funds. The former president, the presumably God-fearing Sheikh Shariif, who one would have thought would be faithful to the teachings of the Quran, went into the business of steeling public funds with abandon as if it was all manna from heaven!. But his record pales in comparison with the current leader. From the word go, plundering



government coffers was the main preoccupation of the President and his cohorts.



The story of Yussur Farah Abraar, resigning in October 2013 from her post as Governor of the Central Bank, because she refused to facilitate the transfer of millions of dollars from the Bank, was the centre piece of the Report of the United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia. This was the beginning of the end of any

trust donors and international community had on the probity of the president and his government. In private, some donors refer to the establishment as **Ali Baba and his thieves** and keep their distance. **Amin Amir's** regular cartoons say the same thing but more sharply and captivatingly.

h . Mogadishu's Comeback and Rebirth of Somali Nationalism

Mogadishu had become a byword over the years for all the horrors that took place in the city following the overthrow of the Siyad Barre's government and the collapse of the State. The bitterness it unleashed rumbles on to the present day. Such are the feelings that some sections of the Somali population, in particular those who were targeted as hailing from other clans, believe Mogadishu is a clan enclave and hence disqualifies itself as a national capital. Their understandable fear is that history could repeat itself and they could become victims once again for the second time. Once bitten twice shy as they say.

Reservations against Mogadishu's fitness as national capital is not without reason considering that some of the wrongs committed have not yet been settled to the present day. But in its defence, it has to be recognized that property claims (and counter claims as often happens) as the outstanding issues from the civil war are legal and administrative matters and the failure to deal with them is a political failure that rests on the shoulders of the President, the government headed by the Prime Minister and the Benadir regional authority and not Mogadishu as a city per se.

All the same, the fact remains that unless this residual simmering problem is solved it would continue to raise questions about Mogadishu's suitability to be the capital of the nation where the rights of all its people, above all property rights, are respected irrespective of their clan origin and the region from which they hail. But there is no reason to doubt that this problem would be solved with the next national leaders after President Hassan who has forfeited the trust of the people .

What needs to be born in mind otherwise is that the people of Mogadishu themselves have equally suffered from our recent tragic history to the point where the city was destroyed by their own internecine intra-sub clan fighting and subsequently by the Ethiopian occupation. They are fully aware that a capital where its inhabitants live in harmony, peace and justice is as much in their interest as anybody else. That is why they have no desire to see continued injustice against some of its residents or to subject themselves and their city to another mindless destruction.

Turning from the dark side of Mogadishu, there is also an emerging positive and promising side to it - a rebirth of the city if not of Somalia itself. Unlike elsewhere in the country, its residents having been transformed by their bitter experience. Now they have little time or desire to indulge in divisive corrosive clannism. Instead, they focus on productive engagements -securing their daily basic needs in an environment where they have to rely only on themselves. The spirit of renaissance and renewal of the city is everywhere.

Mogadishu has come to survive, function and even excel in some sectors. Communication and building construction are playing a pivotal role in economic activities. Hotels, restaurants, high-rise buildings, renovations of decrepit buildings, et are some of the eye-catching sights as one drives in Makka El Mokarram. Education and health are almost all in private hands. Numerous Universities have sprung up and churning out each year thousands of degree-holders coming from every region of Somalia - a new generation that has a different mindset, more forward-looking and working for a better future than the generations before them who only knew how to destroy things.

As proof of the confidence in Mogadishu and its future, countless Somalis from every corner of the country and also from the diaspora have voted with their feet and continue to return to the city in search of work, education, health, business, etc. The returnees probably now

outnumber those who consider themselves Mogadishu's native residents. The city is becoming progressively cosmopolitan and integrated as it used to be in its heyday. This increasingly maturing civic mindset upholds its emerging rebirth which seems irreversible, deterring a relapse into the bad old days.

There lies the hope for Somalia and Somali nationalism. What Somalia instead lacks are visionary patriotic and competent national leadership which could productively channel the energy and amazing talent of our people, above all our new educated generations streaming from our universities and from the diaspora, into nation-building. It is up to us to get the leadership we deserve and if we don't we only have ourselves to blame.

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