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Assessing Chatham House's Somalia Paper Somalia's Federal Future: Layered Agenda's, Risks and Unity¹

**By Faisal Roble
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General Observations

Jason Mosley's research paper ([September 2015, Chatham House of the Royal Institute of International Affairs](#)) is a timely appraisal of Somalia's challenges and opportunities in its forward movement to establish better governance. The paper is a fair, well-researched analysis, albeit with theoretical flawed, of Somalia's tortured journey to constitutional federalism, the democratization challenges facing it, and the conflation of international and regional actors shaping Somalia; it allocates enough space, with subtitles, to three pillars of the new Somalia that are Puntland, Jubbaland and the Federal government. For reasons that are beyond the scope of this assessment, the paper omits or limits discussion of Somaliland, Southwest and GalMudug.



The paper also gives a cursory review of the origins of Somalia's federalism by going back to the I.M.Lewis- Mayall report, "A Study of Decentralized Political Structure for Somalia: A Menu of Options."² Three options provided in this study were: Consociational form of government, a decentralized unitary state, and federalism. Other options on the table at the time included secession and a full-blown disintegration of Somalia. Mosely observes that the "federalist option project appears still to be viable, if under strain." He distinguishes "between the prospects for

¹ Jason Mosely, associate fellow with the Africa Program, has expertise in the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, and South Sudan) and speaks Amharic

² This report, codirected by I. M. Lewis and James Mayall, was prepared by consultants from the London School of Economics, and was commissioned by EU and UNDP, Somalia Unit, 1995.

continued institution-building and capacity-strengthening within the current context of federalism, and the questions of legitimacy and inclusivity.” Somalia lacks both, giving more weight to the later for state reconstruction.

While Mosley’s research paper has empirical strengths, especially in its discussion of the pitfalls of the 4.5 power-sharing and how this formula contaminated democratic representation (I will come back to this), its theoretical weaknesses are paramount.

Mosley advances five general overarching observations:

- Hopes for elections in 2016 are slipping away and dwindling by the day.
- The intractable dependence of Somalia on foreign powers – both frontline and regional states – is an integral part of “rebuilding” Somalia.
- There are dangers associated with fast-tracking or/and fabricating regional states before they are organically ready, especially when/if the new states jeopardize the gains so far made. The GalMudug and Puntland conflict is cited as a case in point.
- Puntland’s constant conflict with Mogadishu and the bullish approaches of the federal government versus the regions with regard to the interpretation of the Draft Constitution and resource-sharing have to a degree contributed to the stagnation of federating Somalia.
- The failure of the 4.5 formula and the exclusion of smaller and unarmed groups from power-sharing are already sowing the seeds for yet further political instability in the country.

Strengths

The paper is well-informed about the current political entanglements in the country. It portrays a correct picture of nagging and perpetual conflicts between Puntland and GalMudug, and Puntland and the central government regarding ambiguous sections of the constitution, mainly dealing with state formation and resource sharing.

In one of the better written sections, the paper correctly penalizes clan elites and their instrumentalization of clan structures in that their “political agenda is determined by elite bargain, and does not necessarily reflect popular will.” The paper is unequivocal in its criticism of top-down governance both at the national and local levels. Mosley eloquently writes: “Larger clans are more organized and have superior resources, and so in effect dictate regional state formation politics and constitutional negotiations under the prevailing 4.5 clan formula (or a regional version of 4.5 for clan representation in a given area). Indeed ongoing neglect of minority interests increases the chances of future instability.

Recent talks between IJA and SFG were reflective of the culture of ignoring minorities, an ideology that permeates Somali politics. In a recent talk between IJA and Prime Minister Omar Sharmarke, Villa Somalia wanted to pressure Madobe to allocate more seats on the principles of

4.5 as opposed to expanding inclusivity of less armed groups on the basis of districts inside Jubbaland. Subsequently, president Madobe promised to expand inclusivity without basing it on the maligned 4.5.

In a piece I published on the Horn of Africa Journal, “The Destruction of Somalia and the Regional Question,”³ I specifically cautioned against basing governments on the 4.5 formula at the regional states’ levels. Mosley correctly and poignantly captures the devastating regressive impacts that 4.5 power sharing is having on the governance sphere of Somalia. Given how devastating the 4.5 formula has turned out to be, I.M. Lewis, alias the deacon of modern Somali Studies, must be restlessly turning in his grave, for he would not have wished any harm for Somalis.

A second area of strength of the report is its lucid analysis of recent developments in Jubbaland. Mosley writes that there are two factors that made this region a viable federal state: (1) Barre Hiraale’s signing of a reconciliation agreement in August 2014, followed by the landslide election of Ahmed Madobe as a president in 2015; (2) the presence of foreign troops in the region, which vastly contributed to the security sector. He also underlines that Villa Somalia in the past had used the threat of Alshabab to stall state formation in Jubbaland.

The paper also sheds needed and timely light on the intrinsic structural challenges facing IJA:

1. Expanding diversity in Ras Kamboni troops.
2. Bringing back supporters of Hiiraale into the IJA coalition as governance takes root.
3. Encouraging representation of less armed groups in governance.

Mosley’s misgiving of the practice of a ‘winner takes all’ approach both at local and national level has increasingly become the norm. A good part of the message of the paper, which most Somalis may endorse, is captured by this succinct statement: “The political processes and state formation projects currently underway do not represent bottom-up approaches. Rather, these are decentralized approaches for managing a larger group of elite interests.” In other words, the current formula of 4.5 is only inclusive in as far as the leadership of a few powerful and hitherto armed groups is concerned. Mosley seems to conclude that, if not reversed, the course on which the country is travelling could lead to a renewed civil disarticulation.

Weaknesses

There are three main interrelated weaknesses in the paper. First is a theoretical weakness. Mosley speaks of the Somali society as an “acephalous” one that could prove difficult, if not impossible, to democratize. To set the tone, Mosley passionately and deliberately “anthropologizes” Somali society by arguing that it is a society that lacks hierarchies, thus drawing a deceptive portrait of

³ Faisal Roble, “The Question of Regionalism: how a tripartite political power-sharing destroyed Somalia,” *Horn of Africa*. Volume 30, pp. 1-29. <http://www.wardheernews.com>, accessed September 13, 2015

Somalia that is a primordial diya-paying, “egalitarian” and “non-stratified.” As it is not uncommon in writings by western analysts, Mosley’s paper harkens back to much older anthropological and ethnographic studies of Africans and Somalis by scholars such as Herskovits and I. M. Lewis who present “primordial” cultures ever constant and permanent.

Even after almost 200 hundred years of integration with capitalist market forces, colonialism and neo-colonialism, Mosley would like us to believe that Somalia is still an archaic “diya-paying,” “acephalous,” and “primordial” society.⁴

To the contrary, Somalia is less egalitarian and a more stratified, even exploitative, society.⁵ Its social and political culture has been for some time now dominated by a consumerist, urbanized elite that is a rent-seeking class. This elite, although less educated than its comparable in neighboring countries, has had negatively impact the reconstitution of the failed Somali state.

While much aware of the trappings of the clan culture of Somalis, Mosley completely ignores the duality of Somali society. As the case is with many societies where unequal [capitalist] development took place at the turn of the 19th century, including Somalia, clan (or ethnicity) and class, traditional constructs and capitalist social relations coexist in the same way racism and western democracy do. Mosley misses this intrinsic complexity of the postcolonial Somali society and its state. Without much effort to understand such a duality, Mosley conveniently draws his analysis on the familiar Western scholarship – that Somali society is a hapless primordial society.

A second problem lies with Mosley’s conceptualization of the political utility of clan structure in Somali society. Mosley’s paper suggests that the political utility of the clan factor is a phenomenon of the 1980s:

Utilizing social structure to mobilize combatants or political supporters has been a defining feature of politics in Somalia since state repression intensified towards civil war in the 1980s.

Unfortunately it is not. Clan manipulation for political ends started not in the 1980s but at the beginning of the 20th with British colonial rule and its strategic implementation of Lord Lugard’s theory of indirect rule - manipulating Somalis through their so-called clan chiefs, and

⁴ For an excellent critic of the clan-based paradigms of Somalia’s sociopolitical development, see Lidwien Kapteijns’ “I. M. Lewis and Somali clanship: A critique”, *Northeast African Studies*, *Volum 11, Number 1*, 2004-2010 New Series, pp. 1-23.

⁵ Bruce Berman, “Ethnicity. Patronage and the African State: The Politics of Uncivil Nationalism,” *African Affairs*, July, 2015. Also, for a detailed study on Ethnicity, Democratization and Governance in Africa, see *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* by Donald L. Horowitz, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985.

of course arming one clan or sub-clan against another⁶. The British successfully divided and controlled the Somali people by carefully and effectively applying clan-based local rule, thereby helping distort unity, social cohesion the self-view efficacy of the Somali citizen.

Equally important is that in neighboring Ethiopia, activating Somali clan structure has been the cardinal political ideology of the Abyssinian Empire in that it armed one Somali clan against another in order to advance its regional hegemonic policies. The politicization of the often benign and reciprocity-based precolonial Somali clan, therefore, belongs first of all to the past colonial political dispensation.

A third problem with the paper is its deliberate and calculated omission from or limited discussion of Somaliland. According to the Draft Somali Constitution, to which the paper makes multiple references, Somaliland is still considered an integral part of the sovereign Somali state. Such an omission is not a small matter in the eyes of unionists especially the current sentiment prevailing in Somalia – that the country is run by foreign hands. This also reinforces the brewing national venom against expats, mainly against those in Nairobi, and UN offices in New York.

Last but not least, the report is admittedly written not for Somalis but for the exclusive consumption of Western donors or for those who control the weak, “rent-seeking” federal government of Somalia. Another group that may constitute the targeted audience consists of the consultants in and around Nairobi who established their own cottage industry that feeds off of international aid intended for Somalia. Given that Chatham House represents a repository of Somalia’s past colonial power, a power that has divided Somali people, Mosley’s theoretical flawed, and his deliberate omission of Somaliland from the discussion is all the more troubling; it heightens legitimate suspicion born by Somalis which is that their country and its territorial integrity and national sovereignty is steadily slipping out of their hands. Mosley’s assessment does confirm that suspicion.

In conclusion, Mosley’s argument about the elite invariably corrupting both “diya-paying” clan culture as well as the prospects for good governance is on the mark. His advice to move the country away from the maligned 4.5 formula for power-sharing is in sync with emerging political thinking in the country. Without legitimacy, he seems to caution us that the “enhanced” governance in Somalia may prove illusive for many years to come.

Unfortunately, indefensible is Mosely’s tenacity to cater only to a consortium of international donors with imperialist intentions and predatory powers in the region. And that is why the paper’s theoretical foundation is flawed.

⁶ Moreover, to implement its divisive policies, the British armed “friendly tribes” against the Dervish movement in the 1920s. Also, for a comparative study on the colonial state in Africa, see Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective*, Yale University Press, 1994

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