

Somalia 's Worrisome Leadership: What Next?

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. . . the actual and present condition of Africa [Somalia] is one of deep trouble, sometimes a deeper trouble than the worst imposed during the colonial years.

Basil Davidson, *The Blackman's Burden* , Time Books, 1992, p. 9.

Tell him that we do not wish for greediness
We do not wish that his ears should be hard of hearing
We do not wish that he should act arbitrarily . . .

R.S. Rattray , *Ashanti Law and Constitution*
, Oxford University Press, 1929, p. 82.

I. Introduction

Let's begin with one fundamental assertion: We both love Somalia and its people—our people. This brief essay's central concern, then, is the direction of the country in the wake of the recent announcements of a new leadership and political institutions. We offer these thoughts, though melancholic in word and tone, with the hope that our compatriots will use the new tidings as a potentially valuable development (albeit not a *tabula rasa* as one would have wishes for). That is, an opportunity to be used to move out of the current morass and positively forge ahead towards an authentic renewal.

Somalia has been the only independent country without a national government in modern times¹. Haunting images of warlords condemning multitudes of hapless people to artificial famine moved the United States and the United Nations to intervene in 1992. Although the huge military intervention was successful in saving hundreds of thousands of Somalis from starvation, that effort failed to help the country reconstitute a national government. The chaos which ensued led to the departure of the international force. Subsequently, Somalia dropped off the watch of the world, despite worsening human conditions throughout the country.

It is only after September 11 that it has regained some attention, particularly from the United States—a concern that pivots on preventing possible terrorists finding a safe haven in the area. The United States closely monitors the country despite the fact that the original suspicion that Al Qaida members were in the country had not materialized.

For almost a decade, the only international commitment to help the Somali people has been limited to meager humanitarian aid. It is only in the last two years that the world community, led by the European Union, tried to aid Somalia's peace and reconciliation process. Earlier, nearly a dozen attempts at peace had failed to produce a national government. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a regional organization whose members consist of Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, and Uganda, spearheaded the latest peace conference which has been ongoing in Kenya since October 2002. Unfortunately, incompetence, malfeasance, and conflicting self-interest of some IGAD countries as well as officials of the conference practically ensured that warlords (the main culprits responsible for the suffering of the Somali people), corrupt politicians and their mainly illiterate clients dominated the process and appointed members of the Transitional Parliament. Simultaneously, civic individuals and groups and professionals who did not partake in the destruction of the country and who invested heavily in peacemaking and reconstruction, have been systematically excluded. Certain members of the IGAD and others who supported the process have acted as unabashed partisans rather than honest facilitators and mediators. Regrettably, they used their authority to undermine the integrity of the process. On their part, the civics and professionals also failed to organize and mount a challenge to the modalities of the peace conference, and the fate of their country.

II. IGAD: A Failure and the Need for a Somali Social Contract

The outcome of the IGAD approach to Somali peace has been to *empower the warlords and enfeeble the rest*. Consequently, warlords maneuvered the selection of members of the new Parliament, including appointing many from among their retainers. Most MPs, however, were not necessarily beholden or accountable to anyone and were ready to offer their votes to the highest bidder². Only a few of the MPs have respected their solemn oath to uphold the Draft Charter. As one keen Swedish diplomatic observer of the peace process noted two months ago, “Somalia will have a government of warlords and a parliament,

most of whose members are illiterate.” That prognosis has begun to unfold.

On October 10, 2004, the Transitional Parliament selected Col. Abdillahi Yusuf as President from a roster of candidates. Colonel Yusuf's appointment does not bode well for the future of the transition, given his record as a leader of the Northeast region (Puntland) and as a client of Ethiopia. Mr. Yusuf has a long and disturbing history in Somalia and in his home region, where he acted as a ruler. He is known for making a mockery of political ethics, dictatorial appetite, incompetent administration, and cruel and illegitimate use of public power. After the collapse of the Siyaad Barre regime, the Northeast region of Somalia made impressive progress to restore peace and take tentative measures to create a democratic regional administration. These advances were reversed when Col. Yusuf came to power on July 23, 1998. The Council of Elders who appointed him removed him from office when he refused to relinquish power due to both a poor performance by his administration and the expiration of his tenure. He declined to accept the verdict and reclaimed power through force³. Further, there are many allegations that he has intimidated opponents to an extent that some have fled the region and others are reported to have been eliminated⁴. Col. Yusuf has been a client of Ethiopia since the late 1970s. Most recently, a video (2002) shows him admitting to receiving support from Ethiopia in his attempt to re-take power and consolidate his rule over the region. He has also publicly articulated sectarian and clanist ideas (a video tape shows Mr. Yusuf claiming that Kismayo belongs to the Harti alone) that will not endear him to Somalis from other kin groups. In short, his record does not inspire confidence and, in fact, makes Somalia's new transition deeply worrisome.

III. What Now?: Public Atonement and More

In spite of this appalling background, there is an opportunity to change the course and begin a new chapter. Somalis and many in the international community are eager to witness the end of Somalia's seemingly endless nightmare. But this yearning should not be an excuse to avoid taking stock of the illegitimacy of the Conference, the abysmal quality of most of the MPs, and the profile of the person named as president. The proceedings in Nairobi were neither about genuine power-sharing nor designed as a peace process. There is overwhelming evidence that it was incompetently organized and managed⁵, and that

the selections of delegates and, ultimately, members of the new Parliament were, at best, highly irregular. The daunting question, then, is this: *Can such an inflated number of Parliamentarians (275) and a President whose public record is severely blemished by clanist and brutal rule, and with very limited capacities shepherd reconciliation, effective reconstruction, and national revival?*

Most Somalis might be willing to conditionally support a peace-making and reconstruction period under the transitional regime, despite the sinister machinations that produced the dispensation. We proffer a minimum of five major conditions under which public support might jumpstart a new and worthy social contract:

- Public and clear admission of past crimes and misdeeds of the leaders, starting with the Transitional President, and members of Parliament (*toobad keen & Cafis*). Such a posture must include a request for forgiveness;
- The articulation of a vision for the country that sets the direction and main particularities of the new time;
- Formally and urgently make a request to the African Union for the immediate creation of high-powered commission (South Africa, Nigeria and Algeria) with a significant nonpartisan Somali membership to guide the peaceful reconciliation between the Northwest region (Somaliland) and the Somali transitional government;
- A legally binding undertaking that the regime will manage the transitional process peacefully, democratically, transparently, and through the law and protection of human rights;
- Create a lean (no more than a dozen) cabinet and ambassadorial appointments that are highly qualified and competent;
- Ensure that the National Commissions (i.e., reconciliation, constitution, civil service, etc.) be formed transparently and professionally, and are led by a nonpartisan group.

The above might not be enough, but nothing short of these acts and promises will inspire wide public trust for the transition. To make certain that this new social contract is honored, the inception of a *national watchdog group* with international representation from the E.U., U.S.A.,

A.U., and U.N. that will monitor deviations from these principles is *absolutely necessary*. The earliest signal that will reveal the regime's commitment to these conditions is how and what type of senior administrators are selected. One of the essential characteristics of the Siyaad regime was a nefarious nepotism in the appointment of key positions of the state. Recent regional administrations and the TNG have turned that practice into an art: many of the top people around the leaders of these operations are/were family members, i.e., brothers, uncles, in-laws, nephews, cousins, etc. This has created a political culture in which only close family members are trusted and rewarded. Such privatization of civic space destroyed people's faith in public affairs and enervated collective ownership of the commons. The first acid test of the new leadership is whether transitional leaders bring on board a cadre of professionally skilled Somalis, who are not related to them, as top managers in the new administrative apparatuses of the state.

Would this transitional period begin to heal the deep wounds of the civil war and overcome the dictatorial legacy of the old regime and the nightmare of warlord tyranny, given the dearth of skilled and committed people in the Parliament and government leadership? The old pattern of failure can be circumvented only if at least five factors are tightly interwoven:

- First, the new leaders commit themselves to the aforementioned principles of the new social contract.
- Second, given the transitional regime's desperate need for material support, the international community, particularly the EU who has been the main supporter of the Conference in Nairobi, must play a decisive role to ensure that the militias are *fully disarmed* and a professional and effective police force is established. In addition, the expected bankers of the transition must also *demand* that civics and professionals play a strategic role in re-establishing major public institutions. These two acts would trigger confidence in the transition.
- Third, such bold interventions would convince a fragmented and disoriented public that the world community is seriously committed to sustained peace and reconstruction. Without such a concrete and resilient cue from the international community, a vulnerable public would have little reason to expose itself to the risk of confronting leaders who have less than a civic record.

- Fourth, skilled Somalis inside the country and in the diaspora must rise to the challenge of the transition if they get an opportunity to use their talents to rebuild the country. These groups are likely to enthusiastically respond to the call if the international community strategically involves them in rebuilding public institutions.
- Finally, Somalis of goodwill will rally behind the transition if the promised aid to the country is used to support local entrepreneurs and NGOs, and to nurture local ownership of the transition. On the contrary, Somalis will not actively endorse the new dispensation if foreign consultants and international NGOs dominate the reconstruction. Many have learned sharply negative lessons in these years of political wilderness characterized by demeaning manipulations by external hands.

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that the Somali people, particularly the civic and professional elements, have been hostages in their own home. Since the withdrawal of the U.S. and U.N. troops from the country in 1995, the world community has told Somalis that only after they have freed themselves will assistance flow in. The irony is that the international community, in taking this stance, guaranteed the paramountcy of the warlords. It would seem that the IGAD strategy, supported by the international community, prioritized brokering a deal between the merchants of violence and clanism. The outcome of the selection process indicates that only partial power-sharing has been achieved. Consequently, peace can only be sustainable and reconciliation feasible *if and only if* a significant proportion of the population is convinced that the transition will progressively lead to a complete restoration of *citizens' rights*. It is unlikely that the emergent leaders would, on their own initiative, mentor a process of democratization which would steadily empower the country's citizens. For, such a possibility is clouded by the wrongful and undemocratic methods employed to select members of key organs of the anticipated state. *The only recipe that has the prospect of transforming tyranny and chaos into an evolving democracy in Somalia is if the leaders of the regime solemnly accept the principles of the social contract and if that is resolutely backed by the international community.*

The new dispensation has two major assets that could be productive, if intelligently utilized. First, most of the public has learned to fend for itself, albeit at low level of subsistence, without state support during the last two decades. Such existential self-reliance could mean that a

talented and committed state leadership could chart a new public-private partnership, instead of the state dominating the reconstruction process. This strategy will have the advantage of tapping into entrepreneurial and survival skills Somalis have honed over the last twenty years, as well as attract professionals whose major concern is effectively rebuilding their country. To assemble this project will require a mature and ambitious leadership—one that is not afraid to single out talent and the nation's best and brightest to serve. Second, *the Somali people seem eager to leave behind the horror of the last twenty years. They would support the new order if it can deliver peace and justice. The glaring conundrum is whether the current crop of MPs and government leaders are credible and astute enough to capitalize on this occasion and commence the journey of rebirth.*

IV. A Recapitulation

Confidence building is vital and the principles sketched above are critical to generate trust. A public admission by the new leaders of their past misdeeds/crimes and an appeal for forgiveness *alone* can provide a minimum *basis for initiating* the people's faith in the transition . *The second major initiative that would boost public confidence is for the Transitional President to courageously acknowledge that he does not have the credibility to deal with the Northwest (Somaliland) due to his past military intervention in the Sool and Sanaag regions, and his clanist rantings. Consequently, a high-powered African Commission (outside IGAD) should be set up to mediate this potentially catastrophic difficulty.* Third, the new regime should commit itself to a legally binding contract that will ensure transparency, freedom of expression, real democratization, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Fourth, the international community's attentive and effective engagement with reconstruction is indispensable.

To close, a recent survey (October 2004) of African citizens unequivocally illustrated that the regimes in the continent have been a heartbreaking disappointment⁶. Similarly, the partisan role of IGAD and its baneful mismanagement of the Somali conference exposes, again, the bankruptcy of national and regional elites. IGAD's legacy will be a dark one— too fraudulent and inept to have a meaningful role in regional affairs. Simultaneously, the leaders of the new Somali dispensation must realize that the era when dictatorial and deceitful leaders could hoodwink or intimidate the public is over. The nation's as

well as the leaders' only salvation is for the latter to *repent*, reject to be a vassal of another state, and lead ethically and ably⁷. The alternative is the perpetuation (for all of us) of the curse of mutual predation, international contempt, and abuse.

Notes

¹See Abdi Ismail Samatar and Ahmed I. Samatar, eds., *The African State: Reconsiderations* (Portsmouth, Maine: Heinemann, 2002).

²It is reported that some of the presidential candidates paid as much as \$3,000 per MP vote. The great irony is that some of the candidates' salesmen took cash and the Quran to potential vote sellers. The seller, then, was sworn to cast his/her vote for the buyer. Impartial witnesses reported that money was "King." A brutally honest MP stated, "if money had a father today, he would have wept due to the ease with which it was squandered." This suggests that swearing on the Quran for these MPs had no sacred meaning. What possible value would the swearing of the new president have for concerned citizens?

³Here is how a witness reported the problem: "At the end of the 3-year term on July 30, 2001, none of the mandated tasks was carried out. No plausible reason(s) were offered for the noncompliance. The government of Col. Abdillahi Yusuf's mandate hence expired for all practical and intent purposes. But Col. Yusuf was not ready to abide by the provisions of the law and to relinquish office. Instead, he began to unceremoniously insist on obtaining another three-year mandate and refused to hand over responsibility to the Chief Justice, as set by the Charter. . . . In the meantime, the Chief Justice convened a constitutional conference, as provided for in the Charter, within the established period of 30 days, the same procedure with which Col. Abdullahi Yusuf and his Vice-President were elected three years earlier. At the end of a long debate, the conference elected on November 10, 2001, Col. Jama Ali Jama . . . for a three-year term. . . . Rather than complying with the law and the wishes of the people, Col. Yusuf opted for employing illegal maneuvers . . . including the use of force and acts of terror and violence. He refused to recognize the newly elected president and declared himself as the 'legitimate president.' After the election of the new president, Col. Yusuf soon amassed a formidable armed force with the help of Ethiopia and preemptively attacked the peaceful city of Bossaso, killing at least 14 innocent civilians and injuring more than 48. . . . Col. Yusuf and his militia force of about 300 people with 17 so-called technicals . . . led by himself landed on Garowe and immediately attacked a residential villa, where the newly elected President, Col. Jama, was staying. The attack was a surprise. Eleven innocent civilians were killed and 31 others injured. The main target, President Jama, luckily escaped unharmed. . . . About a month later, Col. Yusuf launched another attack on Garowe. This time around, the main target was a prominent and highly respected businessman, Farah Dheere, whose crime was that he [opposed Col. Yusuf]. While driving his car, the targeted victim was assailed and murdered in cold blood by armed militia." Unpublished Report. Bossaso, January 2003.

⁴It is worth noting that a case is pending in a British court in which Col. Yusuf is accused of masterminding the murder of Sultan Hurre. It is reported that Col. Yusuf admitted that his bodyguards killed the Sultan (Case NO: HQ02X03221 Supreme Court of England and Wales).

⁵Ahmed Samatar and Abdi Ismail Samatar, "Somali Reconciliation: Editorial Note," *Bidhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 3 (2003): 1–15.

⁶This survey was carried out by UN Economic Commission for Africa. See www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/Africa/3737956.stm. October 13, 2004

⁷The first sign is foreboding since the same relatives and security people surround the Transitional President. This arrangement is a continuation of the odious practices of Siyaad's last years, regional administrations and the previous TNG.