Abdulkadir Osman Farah

The politics of civil society and language

1. Introduction

Within the past two decades Somalia became synonymous with everything from violence, famine to religious extremism. Somalia is a country with contradictions. On the one hand, it is a country with relatively homogeneous people in terms of language, ethnicity, culture and religion. On the other hand, we see a nation that so far failed to translate the cultural and social relationship to a legitimate functioning political and institutional system.

Contemporary experts of the Somali society underline the significance of the Somali language, especially in Somali proverbs, not only reflecting the essence of culture but also everything about the Somalis. For instance the nation's short histories and proverbs contain not only description and analysis of the society, but also solutions to the numerous challenges facing the country (Kapchitz, 2010). Somalis themselves, as well as the rest of the world, underestimate the Somali's ability to interpret and develop their political culture and society through language and literature. The political and economic elite have for decades ignored or oppressed people's attempt to build their society with linguistic and communicative public engagement based on mutual understanding and respect (Farah & Yusuf, 2003). While some analysts distinguish the elite from the mass, others highlight the clash between rural-urban culture which remains essential for the Somali cultural and political development/underdevelopment (Afrax, 2000 & 2010). Urban-rural relationship, partly exacerbated by various colonial and dictatorship rules, contributed to the Somali people's inability to develop joint socio-political structure.

This article presents and argues for the need to pursue two main interdependent aspects currently vital for the reconstitution of viable state and peace in Somalia. The first is the consolidation of viable civil society fundamental for any state formation. The second is the implementation and application of linguistic approach, particularly by the new leadership, in order to obtain and mobilize public legitimacy. The article further reflects recent development and consolidation of the Somali civil society (since 2012) as some of the people currently occupying the top governmental offices have over years belonged to the civic stratum. The core argument is that the Somali language and the way in which the current leadership deploys that useful medium might determine not just the process of obtaining legitimacy for their immediate projects but also the overall mobilization of increasingly globalized and fragmented Somalis.

2. Nation, state and language

Alexis de Tocqueville, researching on society and nation building, once stated that language is the strongest and most durable that ties a nation together (De Tocqueville, 1835:28). Among the Somali scholars Ahmed Samatar was one of the first to study the relationship between language and the state in the modern Somali context. He analysed the contradiction of the so-called scientific socialism the military regime was telling people rhetorically and the realities on the ground (Samatar, 1988). The Somalis have a national language that connects them and constitutes one of the strongest characteristics of been a Somali. In addition due to the significance of poetry in politics, in Somalia language, nationalism and socio-political functions are intricately linked (Mazrui, 1986:39). But similar to many developing countries, the administrative and the language of education have long been foreign and colonial. For the Somalis mainly the English and the Italian languages have often privileged the urban elite and the educated. Later this asymmetry spilled over the state formation process, the ruling elite and the relationship between citizens and the state (Ahmed, 1996: 103). Consequently after independence civil servant jobs went to those who spoke colonial languages.

The leaders of many countries in post-colonial Africa confronted challenges of national building. On one hand they needed to promote solidary pointing on what people had in common, for instance the suffering under colonialism. On the other they have to differentiate themselves from the colonialists. Many of them felt trapped into the past as they often applied colonial framings and language formulations. This complicated the process of nation and state building.

Leaders and State authorities often exercise power through two main dialectical channels. The first constitutes top down coercion approach through more or less direct power implementation by disciplinary structures e.g. the military, police and others. The second approach rests on consensual cultural and linguistic rationalization and interaction between dominant authorities and the wider public constituents (Holub, 1992:77). This form of interaction mainly takes place at the meso-level with the incorporation of more or less informal socio-political structures. In this regard communicative skills with emphasis on discourse and language management capabilities becomes vital not just for obtaining necessary public support but equally maintaining and consolidating legitimate public authority.

Historically European colonial authorities deployed indiscriminate coercive power against resisting Somalis longing for justice and independence (Poddar et al, 2008). Colonial administrations have also, in certain extent recruited poets, artists and other cultural profiles to counter literary opposition expressions (Lobell & Maucer, 2004). Similarly successive post-colonial authorities, depending on the actual context, combined the coercive and consensual approaches to prevent public disturbances.

3. The evolution of modern Somali civil society

In Somalia civic fragmentation started with the so-called colonial modernization and have since continued until the transnational disintegration during which civil society groups following the state collapse sought comfort in semi-autonomous regions, clans and Diasporic transnational interest groups. Ironically today merchants and the economic elite represent the most consistent and the least disjointed civil society groups in the country. Business groups continue to organize across region, clan and ideology. Through their more or less legal capital enterprise they hold grip on the society. In lesser extent level women, youth and voluntary organized professional groups also perform substantial roles (Lewis, 2001). Women activists played a significant role during the struggle for independent, the period under dictatorship, during the collapse. More recently they have been facilitating much needed social and humanitarian activities in the country. In contrast most of the educated elite remained fragmented into regional

and clan affiliations undermining the potential emergence of cohesive nationwide visionary national project (Mohamoud, 2005:38).

It all began when modernization and embedded colonization experiments divided the Somali civil society into contradictory religious, secular and nationalistic frames. For some Somalis such distinction provided an opportunity to counter colonial powers and their missionary programmes. The colonial division of Somalis between traditional and modern components formalized contradicting proponent and opponent categories in relation to the colonial system (Samatar, 1989:58). Those who embraced the colonial project qualified as modern and civilized components, while those preserving their traditional values whether religious or customary reflected primitiveness and underdevelopment. Part of the secularized and urbanized initially accommodated the colonialist approach. The colonial led urbanization was, however, far from a cosmopolitan and civilizational interaction and progress. It represented an urban distortion in which colonial administrations recruited clients for auxiliary positions in the colonial machinery as security personal, drivers and domestic workers. The process deepened the societal cleavage of between those working for the system, including the imitation of colonial inspired linguistic and cultural priorities, confronted by the opponents of such non-indigenous practise.

Instead of reducing such divergence, post-colonial elites have worsened the situation and classified civil society into pro and against authoritarianism constellations. Actually the dictatorship largely maintained and continued the oppression began by colonial powers. While colonialism pursued simplistic division of the society into traditional and less traditional components, the authoritarian system further complicated and introduced additional divisive lines. Notwithstanding that following the country's independence people trained by colonial powers within and outside the country accessed and attained privileges. Actually colonial powers together with the UN observed the transition period leading to a form of post-colonial era. Clearly the post-colonial elite became corrupt as expected providing fertile ground for the military takeover in 1969. The military regime initiated civic-militarization processes through its orientation centres extensively polarizing the society though its militias (guulwadayaal) consisting of urban unemployed and

semi-nomads. This had exacerbated intensive out-migration and brain drain as civic minded groups left for either exile or for joining the armed opposition groups abroad.

So the extensive militarization of African societies, including the civic components, came with European colonization through colonial military and bureaucratic organization modelling combined with ritualization of "tone" and "style" (Mazrui, 1976). When colonial powers nominally left, their African successors concentrated on national sovereignty and security and spent the scarce resource to the construction one party military regimes leading to dictatorship and economic decline (Bratton, 1989).

During the state collapse and warlordism Somali civil society suffered while trying to fill the vacuum of state collapse. Civic communities provided service under warlord intimidation and persecution leading to the construction of civil and un-civil formations (warlords and troublemakers). Few organizations have nonetheless managed to provide health and education services. The warlords were also divided as secular groups terrorising people and religious groups exploiting their religious positions. Both groups utilized identity and clan premises. Therefore civil society found itself in both contributing to peace and security challenges.

Then Somalis quite unprepared entered the transnational era under which civil society become globally interlinked transnational communities trying to adjust to the expanded role of Diaspora contribution and involvement in the homeland. This raises the dilemma to benefit from trans-nationalization while avoiding yet another "imperial conquest through globalization" (Zekmi et al. 2010:17). This is possible if global civil society manages reducing the gap between top down global hegemonic power confronted with the new popular bottom up demands for justice and sovereignty (Bourdieu, 1998). In addition transnationalism dimension provides Diaspora communities with an opportunity to engage and mobilize in multi-sited network frames to challenge the hegemonic order that often partially succeed to oppress civic engagement in the homeland (Hepner, 2003). For the Somalis transnational political organization as well as the *hawaala* system

ensures a dynamic transnational political, economic and social system linking the homeland to global transnational locations (Horst, 2004).

4. Somalis long for an inclusive world order

Strong states have always dominated world affairs, while weaker states often exercise little or no influence. Although no obvious jungle law prevails, in these years a desirable situation with a clear and coherent international order does not exist. For most of the past century, humanity endured under a West versus East international balance of power with mutual tension and mistrust. The two dominant global powers, the U.S. and the Soviet Union each represented and strengthened their respective alliances. The bipolar international structure was in many ways, though occasionally frightening, relatively identifiable and in some extent predictable.

Following a brief period at the turn of the millennium with a single remaining offensive American superpower, humanity is again at critical juncture with seemingly complicated and unpredictable world. No one was, for example, prepared for the continuing Arab mass revolt against decades of Middle Eastern and North African dictators. In addition, the countries in Asia and South America, with increasing political, economic and demographic influences, demand more inclusive international system.

Furthermore the world continues to struggle with the phenomenon of "failed states". Such countries with collapsed or failed state institutions such as Somalia constitute a serious "threat to global stability." Georg Sørensen, a reputable profile in international affairs, believes that failed states threaten global security due to their inability to provide service for citizens and effectively control territories (Sorensen, 1999). In other words weak states facilitate piracy, mass migration and extremism, in prospect not just paralyzing the concerned countries, but also potentially engulfing the rest of the world.

In reality failed states in Africa have long been fragile and lacked legitimacy. This is partially due to the fact that both the colonial and post-colonial state formations

represent strange inventions for the continent. Consequently, the so-called "vampire States" led by corrupt elites oppress, exploit and victimize citizens. Moreover, the existence of a formal state apparatus alone cannot guarantee security. Currently for instance both Mexico and Syria states persecute their own people in large numbers. In comparison, when we ignore natural disasters, the number of people who die directly of armed conflict in the stateless Somalia remains minimal (although natural disasters and famine take many lives). This is mainly due to ancient informal traditional structures that ensure relative order.

In general, in a globalized world, states often lose their ability to controlling territories and people. Such conditions force states, in certain occasions, to delegate power to private companies and supranational institutions. Though the state, as an institution, lost monopoly, the dominant perception remains "State or chaos". As Collier suggests state formation takes longer and needs certain gradual construction of internal legitimacy.

> "It took European centuries to get out of a stateless condition that followed the collapse of the Roman Empire. Somalia could consolidate much faster, because unlike medieval Europe there is a modern world out there to help and a roadmap. But as long as the international community tries to run the story backwards, Somalia will likely continue to top the list of failed states "(Collier, June 2012).

Clearly, in attempts to reconstitute national institutions, Somalis seek genuine commitment from the international community in particularly recognizing and complementing existing 'successes' on the ground. The Turkish leadership demonstrated such positive gesture by initiating numerous construction projects and inaugurating commercial flights from Istanbul to Mogadishu. The Turkish Prime Minister became the first world leader to symbolically break Mogadishu's more than 20 years isolation. Turkey shares cultural and historical relations with the Horn of Africa and is therefore in a unique position to bridge the gap between the West and the Horn of Africa. Regardless of any international goodwill engagement, responsibility rests on the Somalis themselves. Somalis must democratically find out which social order and state structure that suits them best. In this regard, a more inclusive effort rather than a military intervening international order will be helpful. Such an opportunity have Somalis longed for since the Portuguese seafarer Vasco da Gama in 1500-century on his way to India attacked the Banadir coast, which was then a well-functioning cosmopolitan city-state (Subrah, 1997). This article proposes that, in order to make this time right, Somali national reconstruction efforts has to be based on civil society foundation. The formal end of the transitional period should lead to a renewed optimism and willingness to move forward.

5. Civil society resurrection in Somalia

In the eyes of the world, Somalia has for many years symbolized war, death and human tragedy. For the first time in several decades, the world have for the past months witnessed a different picture and a possible rebirth of a peaceful Somalia. Around the world Somalis, with celebrations and optimism, welcomed the indirect election of a parliamentary speaker and a President who later appointed a government consisting of ten ministers including to women. It was politically wise and significantly refreshing of the current leadership in Mogadishu to come up with a small government (ten ministers) including hopefully two strong women. Women had long suffered in Somalia. Although Somali women are the bread winners of most Somali households they have endured brutal warlordism and gang militia atrocities. It is unclear how the limited cabinet and promotion of women will work out in relation to the notoriously distrustful Somali clan dynamics. The daring steps by the current leadership will certainly improve Somalia's currently catastrophic international image. In addition depending on what this government does, it might help the country improving its standing on the annual global indexes so far repetitively marked by undisputed high ranking status in statelessness, corruption and abject poverty.

In this post-conflict critical juncture, leadership matters. It also helps that the well-respected lawyer, former top parliamentary speaker, Mohamed Jawaari, is a civil servant, intellectual and Somali-Scandinavian who for about 20 years have

worked and lived in Norway. The President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud is a former university lecturer, peace and human rights activist. During the prolonged civil war, he chose to remain in the country facilitating the education of war torn young generations and helped the poor and victims of the warring militia factions. The Prime minister is an economist who is also a successful business man. Likewise the president appears different from previous so-called Somali presidents. He seems insightful, thoughtful and careful but nonetheless confronts pressing challenges including the efforts to balance often conflicting and competing internal and external demands. The core question remains: will the president and the government be able to command some sort of state authority or will it be locked in Villa Somalia politics. We know Somaliland and Puntland increasingly appear out of reach (acting independently from Mogadishu in almost all aspects). The South largely remains occupied either by foreign forces or extremists. Obviously the easiest way to reconstitute Somalia and thereby restore the country's dignity and future is to let the president and the government deal with challenging issues. This is a qualified leadership but for Somalia there is obviously a long way to go before - after decades of destruction – the country could stand on its own feet again. There is still widespread poverty and hopelessness, specially forcing thousands of young people to seek solace in piracy and extremism. In addition, the country is awash with arms, warlords and related gangs continuing to terrorize the population. It is therefore essential that such qualified leadership should immediately obtain full ownership of the country's political and economic control. So far, Ethiopia, Somalia's regional hegemonic neighbour, a long term ally of the United States, dominated Somalia's stalemate. It might help that both Ethiopia and Somalia have now new leadership. Ethiopia, as the largest country in the region with over 80 million inhabitants, remains indispensable and hegemonic.

6. Language and civic mobilization in Somalia

Colonial powers engaged Somali civil society, not just coercively, but also through discourse and language application. Both the British and the Italians utilized urban people and the educated who could speak in foreign languages. Nonetheless Somalia is one of the few countries in Africa where colonial linguistic penetration did not fully succeed. This has probably to do with Somalis' continuing resistance

in not allowed total colonization and settlement of foreigners in the country.

During the military regime the use of Somali language and the mobilization of the civil society was an integrated part of the national project and government consolidation. The regime later failed to convince the public linguistically. The role of the mediating role by artists and other public intellectuals disappeared or become opposed to the regime. During the collapse the Somali language lost its application and NGOs depending on foreign funding applied more on English and Arabic languages. That has so far failed to bring the civil society and the country together.

7. Language, oratory and the civil society

Oratory is important in the Somali culture, also in the struggle against colonial powers and the mobilization of the civil society (Samatar, 1979). The best known cases are from the application of poetry by the freedom fighter, Sayid Mohamed Abdulla Hassan, popularly ridiculed by the British Empire as "Mad Mullah". He convinced the Somalis that the Jihad against colonial powers were both holly religious and nationalistic duty. The use of literature and oratory continued in post independent periods. Literature was important in this regard. For instance Sayid Mohamed Abdulla Hassan used poetry and military engagement to fight colonialism.

In his book "Literature, clans and the nation state in Somalia" Ali Ahmed argues that it is through language, literature, myth and symbols we understand and construct societies. Language is thus not neutral and spoken in a vacuum. Ahmed suggests that the state is preoccupied with language, myth and symbols to consolidate its grip on power and "oblivious to subtle massages directed at undermining its power base" (Ahmed, 1996:5). According to him language and literature was crucial in independence for struggle, during the authoritarian regime and the collapse. Colonial languages were important in the process of state formation in many African countries, particularly the framing the British concept of "self-determination" (Mazrui, 1986:39). Later the English language played an important role in Pan-Africanism. In this regard Somali language played an

important role in the pursue of Pan-Somalism.

The following author appreciates the importance of been fluent in traditional Somali rural language capabilities. Most Somali leaders commanded Somali language with rural nomadic accent. Reflecting the fact that nomads or semi-nomads dominated Somali politics.

"The PM is a well-spoken and rich in his command of the Somali language. In the tradition of Ciid and Danood accent, often heard from Idaaja, who is a repository of Somali oral history and literature, the PM clearly articulates and enunciates his words so clear that one would not get enough doses want to listen more of him" (Roble, 9th Oct.2012: Wardheernews.com).

Somalis are now fragmented and scattered around the world. Division among Somalis in regional or rural-urban differences no longer makes sense, as Somalis currently inhabit in almost every corner of the world (Bakas, 2009). We therefore need new approaches to understand civil society in intercommunity dialogue and communication. The internet technology already facilitates intense civic communication and mobilization. However such information has still to reach the younger generation born in Diaspora undistorted. Due to improper command of the language the youth might experiment modified versions of the mother language. Alternatively and potentially consolidated Somali governments can open language schools in countries with large Somali concentrations. Here the community can go to language classes in their leisure time. This requires the establishment of global cultural offices to address and accommodate Diaspora's cultural needs. This will help the Somali leadership to address civil society challenges while empowering communities to contribute and learn more about their homeland.

8. Conclusion

During colonial times, command on colonial languages ensured jobs in the colonial administration. In this regard urban communities had better chances than those in the interior. The bureaucracy functioned with foreign languages and the education system taught and socialized young people with foreign languages. Consequently introducing alien cultures, with substantial impact on the process of nation building, divided Somalis. When colonial powers left, civil society appeared confused and inconsistent.

In early 1970s the military regime formalized the written Somali language. The regime publicly rationalized the emphasis on the mother language initiative with the nationalization and integration process in the society. The language project was an integrated part of revolutionary experiments contributing to the consolidation of power in the hands of the army. The recruitment and monopolization of cultural institutions and elites contributed to such endeavour. Later the regime lost the support by the cultural elite paving the way for the country entering a prolonged conflict.

During the civil war Somalia become an open entrepreneurship space in which the Somali language became the victim of transnational NGO expansion. As public schools disappeared following the state collapse, diverse forms of private enterprises filled the vacuum leading to the opening of madras teaching basic religion and Arabic classes, which nonetheless had no organized joint curriculum. On the other side western NGOs rushed to subsidise makeshift schools. NGO approaches, the religious and the western, under-prioritised if not ignoring the Somali language.

So far Somali political elites, both in the south and in the North, failed to enter dialogue with the fragmented civil society and communicate the Somalis with understandable Somali language. This might change as the new leadership as well as the civil society seem to show interest in engaging serious dialogue to move the country forward. The question is as Somalia and Somalis significantly transformed in the past three decades, it is not clear which language the leadership and the civil society would prefer to utilize. Obviously the application of the Somali language is the most suitable. However the scattered Somali society across the globe and with younger generations not commendable of the mother tongue might undermine

such ambition. Therefore the leadership should consider the following three alternatives.

The first is rather ideal in which Somalis continue to rally around the Somali language regardless of geographical dispersion and transnationalism. In this approach, part of the Diaspora will confront communicative and participation challenges. The second is to liberalize the application of languages by allowing Somalis to communicate Somali, Arabic and English making these three languages the official language of Somalis. The approach will lead to the inclusion large portions of the Diaspora, particularly those in Arab countries as well as the wider global Diaspora. Thirdly, the Somali decision makers insist the use of the Somali but provide, like the Turkey, the China and many other countries, transnational Somali language classes so Somalis abroad can learn the national language through the embassies and other official representations. This option requires substantial administrative and economic capabilities not achievable in the near future.

Finally, the success of the current leadership in Somalia and the possible reconstitution of the Somali state depends on the mobilization of the civil society through linguistic and rhetorical capabilities combined with actual pursue and deliverance of clearly stated political promises and programs.

References

- Adjiedj, Bakas, 2009. *World Megatrends: Towards the Renewal of Humanity*, Oxford, UK.

- Afrax, Mohamed, 2010. "Towards a culture for peace, Poetry, Drama and Music in Somali society" Accord, Issue 21, pp. 72-74.

- Afrax, Mohamed, 2012. Somali Theatre, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of London.

- Ahmed, Ali, 1996. *Daybreak is near-Literature, clans and the nation state in Somalia*, Red Sea Press.

- Bourdieu, P., 1998. Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market, trans. R. Nice. New York: The New Press.

- Bratton, Michael, 1989. Beyond the State: Civil Society and Associational Life in Africa, Review article , World Politics, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Apr., 1989), pp. 407-430Published.

- Collier, Poul 2012. "It's Lonely Being No. , Is there Any Hope for Somalia?" Foreign Policy, June.

- De Tocqueville, Alex, 1835. *Democracy in America*.

- Farah, Abdulkadir & Yusuf "Hadraawi"s 2004. Peace journey (Socdaalka nabadda) reaches Aarhus, Denmark"Ali (November 30):, [WWW Document] URL.http://www.hiiraan.ca/2003/nov03/hadrawi_den.htm?ID=46923, [30/03/2004).

- Hepner Tricia Redeker, 2003. Religion, Nationalism, and Transnational Civil Society in the Eritrean Diaspora, Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power, 10:3, 269-293.

- Holub, Renate, 1992. Antonio Gramsci: Beyond Marxism and Post-modernism, Routledge.

- Horst Cindy, 2004. Money and mobility: transnational livelihood strategies of the Somali diaspora, Global Migration perspectives, nr. 9 October 2004, International migration (GCIM).

- Kapchitz, Georgi, 2010. "Reports on Somalia" I, II, III and IV (www.wardheernews.com).

- Lewis, David, 2001. "Civil society in non-Western contexts: reflections on the 'usefulness' of a concept. Civil Society Working Paper series, 13. Centre for Civil Society, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK. ISBN 0753013789.

- Lobell, Steven & Mauceri Philip, 2004. *Ethnic conflict and international politics: explaining diffusion*, Palgrave.

- Mazrui, Ali, 1986. *The political sociology of the English language*, Hague

- Mohamoud, Abdullah, 2005. *State Collapse and Post-Conflict Development in Africa: The Case of Somalia*, Purdue University Press.

- Poddar, Prem et al, 2008. *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures: Continental Europe and its empires,* Edinburg University Press.

- Samatar, Abdi, 1989. *The State and Rural Transformation in Northern Somalia, 1884-1986,* Wisconson Press.

- Samatar, Ahmed, 1988. *Socialist Somalia: Rhetoric and Reality,* London:Zed. Samatar, Said, 1979. *Poetry in Somali politics: the case of Sayyid Maḥammad Abdille Ḥassan,* Vol. 1.

- Sorensen, Georg, 1999. *Development in Fragile and failed states,* Political Science Department, Aarhus University, Denmark.

- Subrah, Manyam, 1997. *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama, Cambridge University Press,* Cambridge.

- Subrah, S., 1997. *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

- Zekmi, Silvia, 2010. Colonization Or Globalization?: Postcolonial Explorations of Imperial expansion, Lexington Books.