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THE COLLAPSE OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY AND  
THE NEW SOMALI ORDER

by

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## THE COLLAPSE OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE NEW SOMALI ORDER

### THE HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SOMALI CRISIS

The dictatorial and repressive regime of General Mohamed Siyad Barre collapsed in January 1991, after much bloodshed and destruction. In 1988 in the Northern Regions alone more than half a million of the population fled their homes and thousands died when his forces bombarded the main towns in the region, including the capital Hargeisa which then became a ghost town. It was ironic that the General himself eventually joined the thousands of Somalis who had been forced to become refugees scattered all over the world, from Australia to Canada and from Indonesia to South Africa, as a result of the destruction of their properties and livelihoods by his regime.

Opposition groups which were the main factor responsible for the downfall of the regime have failed, so far, to form a government and instead became involved in a genocidal war with each other. This inter-factional war has been reported to have caused the death of some 320,000 people, mostly women and children and the elderly, with the population of Mogadiscio, Baidoa, and Kismayo, being the hardest hit. Indeed, this area has been chillingly described as the 'Triangle of Death'.

As well as human suffering, the war has destroyed the entire infrastructure of the country and the basis of the livelihood of the rural population. The capital Mogadiscio has become the theatre of warfare where the sound of guns being fired have replaced the familiar and reassuring traffic noise. World television reporters brought into the homes of millions of people around the globe the horrifying pictures of the Somali tragedy.

The UN finally and belatedly intervened and appointed a Special Representative, Mr. Sahnoun the Algerian diplomat who later became critical of the way the UN handled the Somali crisis.

He eventually resigned. The Then President of the United States Mr. Bush in December 1992 and in the dying days of his administration, authorised a direct US military intervention and this was achieved through the despatching of American forces and thus 'Operation Restore Hope' was put into action which was to lead to the formation of UNISOM2.

Another development on the Somali scene was the withdrawal of the Northern Region (Former British Somaliland) from the Union act of the Union its subsequent declaration of independence in May 1991 as a the new state of 'Somaliland'. Community leaders, politicians and intellectuals held a prolonged conference in the town of Borama in 'Somaliland' between January to May 1993 to discuss the Somali crisis. They appointed Mr. Mohamed Haj Ibrahim Egal, a veteran politician as the President and Abdi- Rahman Aw Ali a long standing executive member of the Somali National Movement (SNM) and who played a prominent role in the reconciliation among the 'Somaliland' communities, as their Vice President. Mr. Egal was first Prime Minister of Somaliland during its short-lived independence from Britain in 1960, after seventy five years of British rule in that country. He also became Prime Minister of unified Somalia between 1967-1969.

In this short paper, I would like to concentrate on two areas which I believe may help us understand the background of the Somali crisis. The first is the reason that the previous Somali social order based on the concept of the unification of all the Somali territories under one state ran into difficulties and secondly, to look at the systematic destruction of the civil society by the 21 years military rule.



## SOMALI NATIONALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE OLD ORDER

Somali political objectives in the past were based on the belief that all Somali territories in the Horn of Africa must be united under one single Somali state. This was seen as the cornerstone of Somali nationhood and without it neither Somali nationalism nor Somali state-building were seen as almost impossible to conceptualise. This belief was first articulated in the political programmes of all national liberation movements operating in the 1940 and early 1950 throughout Somali territories, that is Italian Somaliland, British Somaliland, French Somaliland, Western Somaliland (Ogaden) and the Northern Frontier District known as (NFD). In July 1960 the Italian administered Somalia and the British controlled Somaliland bowing to popular pressure, agreed to bring their respective territories together and thus was formed the first Somali modern state which firmly believed that the other missing Somali parties would follow suit.

The aspiration of a fully united Somalia, that is to say a Somalia that was made up of not just the two British and Italian controlled territories but also of Djibouti, NFD and Western Somaliland (Ogaden), was enshrined in the new Somali constitution. As a result, successive Somali governments invested most of the resources of the country, including human resources, in the military sector since they saw that a fully united Somalia as the ultimate aim. Thus began what might be described as the 'militarization of Somali society'. However, from the beginning this project ran into difficulties, although it remained an inspiring national force.

Let me now look closely at some of these difficulties:

1) During the British rule in Kenya, the Somali population in what was known as Northern Frontier District of Kenya (NFD) was separately administered by Britain from the rest of Kenya since 1926. The British rule there was confronted with a national call for merger with Somalia before Kenya won its independence in 1963. Britain yielded to this demand in 1962, and a plebiscite was conducted in the territory around 90% of the population voted for union with Somalia. However, Britain ignored this demand by telling both to the NFD politicians and the Somali government with whom it had by then several meetings that they must negotiate with Kenya's forthcoming post-independence government. Eventually NFD was incorporated into Kenya and any further struggle for a merger with Somalia was harshly crushed labelling it 'shifta wars'. The stigma of the label still hangs over those who fought for the union.

The Somali people in this area which is now known as the North - Eastern Province of Kenya lived under emergency rule until 1991, thus silencing dissident voices who were still calling for Somali unity.

2) In French Somaliland now known as Djibouti Republic, the national unionist movement founded by the Somali Djiboutian Nationalists leader Mr. Mohamoud Harbi was denied power in that country during the 1950's and 1960's, although his movement enjoyed a wide public support. France repeatedly indicated that the only way it could allow Djibouti's independence was to keep it as a separate state, depending on France militarily, economically and politically. Djibouti achieved its independence in 1977 but on the terms I have mentioned, and France still maintains a military garrison in Djibouti.



3) In Western Somaliland (Ogaden or Zone Five, as it is called now those who were fighting for many years to liberate themselves from the Amhara-dominated Ethiopia managed to liberate their entire country in 1977/78, with the help of the regular Somali National Army, but that was to turn out to rather a short lived success. For both the United States and the former Soviet Union demanded urgent halt to the Somali advance and called for the immediate withdrawal of the Somali regular troops from the area.

From 1960 to 1978 the agenda of the Somali irredentism was again and again raised in international forums, particularly in Organisation of African Unity conferences. But efforts of all successive Somali governments since 1960 were unsuccessful. In a resolution passed in 1964 during its Cairo conference, the OAU stated that pre-independence, i.e. colonial boundaries, should remain unaltered. This rendered the agenda of pan-Somalism even more difficult to achieve. This created a dilemma and confusion in the collective and individual consciousness of Somalis. In other words, the entire collective belief system that had hitherto sustained the concept of pan Somalism was severely undermined.

This important question and its impact on Somali social history and politics has hardly been debated or critically assessed and it is not largely known outside the confines of the Somali local view. One reason perhaps is tendency of writers on Somalia to explain Somali Social history and political life on the basis of the so called clan system and nothing else.

I turn now to the question of destruction of civil society by the military regime.

#### CIVIL SOCIETY AND ITS HISTORICAL ROLE

The birth of the Somali secular state in 1960 strengthened the scope and the power of the civil society, of civil society, I mean the social groups within the urban domain, such as the educational establishment, the press, trade unions etc. Before we go any further through, I would like to say that Somali studies in general still suffer from too much reliance on the methods and analyses of the old Factionalism school of thought in anthropology although this approach has been replaced a longtime ago by other advanced anthropological theories such as Structuralism, particularly the work of professor Levi-Strauss and also by Post-Structuralist theories. Yet, Functionalism is still being applied to explain the modern Somali society, including the present one. It is as if the Somali society remained utterly stagnant and somehow managed to live in total isolation from the rest of the world.

In a leading article titled 'In The Land of The Living Dead' in the Sunday Times of the 30th of August 1992, Professor Ioan Lewis wrote, and I quote, "As the new representative of the United Nations Secretary General Mr. Sahnoun has taken on the fierce and suspicious Somalis at a time when they are more fractious, more belligerent and better armed than ever before, when the warriors have swapped their old weapons for the tanks and bazookas of the cold war". The professor went on "Nearly 80 years ago a brave servant of the empire called Richard Corfield also tried to bring order to the Somalis, when they were in rebellion under a religious leader dubbed the Mad Mullah by the British.

All Corfield got for his pains was a bullet in the head in battle in the epic poetry of Somalia-a bloodthirsty hymn to victory that has lived on in a society steeped in antagonism to outsiders. No doubt Sahnoun in his high-walled villa in Mogadiscio is better protected. But the passions that killed Corfield have not abated." End of quotation.



In the introduction of the article, the paper asked how could those Somali warriors "callously disregard the one million people starving in their midst". and the answer given was and I quote "The answer lies in the culture of Somalis." End of quotation.

I think that there are four important points here. The first is the generalising nature of the assertion in that if one think that some Somalis are suspicious of foreigners, surely this shouldn't lead one to state that therefore all Somalis are also similarly inclined. Secondly, the geography of the country made it a meeting place for most the great human civilizations such as the Egyptian, the Phoenician, the Assyrian and the Greek, as well as the three great world religions, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. For example, the Greek author of the

Periplus of the Euxine Sea, Guide to the North West Indian Ocean, which was written in 40 AD, reported the flourishing trade of the Somali coastal towns. Another documented reference is that of Ibn Battuta the Arab explorer who on visiting Mogadiscio in 1331, described it as a city with a sophisticated stable government with flourishing trade with the outside world. This surely paints a different picture of Somalis and no more suspicious of foreigners than other group. More recently, Professor Charles Gesheker has been providing, the global travelling experience of Somalis, what he described as 'Taqabir'. And thirdly, Corfield may have been a brave soldier of the empire, but he was certainly not sent to Somali territories to keep law and order but to colonise. And finally, the man dubbed by the British as the Mad Mullah of Somaliland is seen in the eyes of the majority of Somalis as a national hero and his movement as the first anti-colonial struggle in Somalia as well as the foundation of Somali modern nationalism. As to whether the poem recited by the 'Mad Mullah' or to give him his real name Sayd Moxamed Abdullah Hassan, who is seen by Somalis as the Shakespeare of Somali literature, was bloodthirsty or not, I leave that for the literary critics.

Having said this, in the general framework, this sort of analysis concentrates heavily on ethnicity to explain the social history of non-European societies. But lately, this approach has been criticised by many quarters largely because it failed to take into account the impact of external influences such as colonialism, urbanisation, and more importantly the market forces which has been undermining traditional social structures since the last two centuries.

Criticising this kind of analysis, Professor Cohen wrote that "In the Third World the tribes, villages and isolated communities which have until recently been our traditional subject matter are everywhere today becoming an integral parts of a new state structure".

On the same theme and with reference to the Somali context Dr. Abdi Ismail Samatar wrote that what surprised him was that "Those who postulate the traditional thesis and subscribe to its assumptions have not seen the need to update [their research], given the phenomenal growth of livestock and urbanisation, and the development of non-traditional nodes of power. Such static reading of social history makes the analysis of social change mechanical, linear and simplistic. Consequently people and the communities in which they live have little ability to innovate to learn from others, to engage in self-improvement or self-destruction and to undergo social transformation. But the reality is often very different, because the inhabitants of any country are not dupes who carry the burden of history without having any capacity to alter the future courses of human affairs."



Ibna Kahaldun, The famous Arab social historian wrote that "Tribes can build empires, but only cities can ultimately perpetuate civilisation." These quotes remind us the departure from the traditional domain to the urban domain. So let me now turn to what do I mean by urban domain.

The post-Somali state enhanced the secular modern institutions such as parliament, trade unions, the educational establishment etc., which started to emerge during the sixties. These institutions became the main engine of change in the new society. A social and urban class with a new and a more Western lifestyle was beginning to emerge.

These urban groups included:

1) Socialist-inclined groups, such as Pan Arab 'Naserites' or followers of late Egyptian President Jamal, which included academicians, journalists, trade unionists.

3) Conservative middle class included business communities,

3) Religious groups which had a long standing ties with the major religious centres and institutions in the Arab world such as the Al-Azhar University in Cairo,

During the sixties the cultural life in the Somali capital Mogadiscio and other major town, including the political debates and the conversations in the cafes and restaurants, which raged from the politics of the cold war to the music of the Beatles, reflected the unmistakable rise of the new middle class.

The national theatre built by the Chines during the 1960's modernised Somali arts literature by giving a urban dimension the popular culture. Important plays were staged, such Shabeel Naguud or 'Woman's Leopard' written by song writer and poet Hassan Sheikh Momin, and later translation into English by Professor Anderjewviski which is available from SOAS library.

Many independent newspapers and magazines were published on daily, weekly and on monthly bases in three languages Arabic, Italian and English. The city had at least 20 cinemas with many regular attendances. At the time Mogadiscio was described one of the best cultural centres in Sub-Sahara countries. The question I would like to raise is this. What has happened to that civil society?

#### **SIYAD BARRE REGIME AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY**

The military regime of Siyad Barre called their system of government 'Scientific Socialism' (Hanti-wadaaga cilmi ku dhisan). At first, the regime managed to mobilise the country under the slogan of national reconstruction at all levels. For the first few years they enjoyed a measure of public support. However, soon after 1975, i.e. six years after coming to power, Siyad Barre by then a virtual dictator put into effect a series of repressive and brutal measures that were to lead not long afterwards to the beginning of the end of the Somali civil society as well as weakening the traditional community leaders outside the civil society.

Around the mid 1970's when as I indicated a few seconds ago the process of the disintegration had started in earnest, the ultimate test of support in the eyes of Barre and his regime has become the ability to prove one's loyalty to him personally or as he called himself 'AABAHA KACAANKA' or 'The father of the revolution.



For instance, in 1975, 15 Islamic scholars were executed and seventy five top civil servants were labelled as reactionaries or "kacaandiid" and were dismissed from their posts and replaced by his supporters, regardless of ability or qualification. What Professor Ahmed Ismail Samatar described as the "vulgarisation of power" had began. The catalogue of repression, corruption and destruction is so long that it impossible to take thorough every aspect them here today.

By the time Siyad Barre was ousted from power in January 1991, the country was not only bankrupt economically and politically but also bankrupt in its civil society and the secular ideas that associated with it. At this point, a vacuum was created and the opposition were ill prepared and equipped to fill the gab.

There is no time for me to go into details of the nature and the scope of the opposition groups, but I would like to say that there is a great deal of misunderstanding about what each opposition group stood for and what genuine support they had.

### THE NATURE OF THE PRESENT CRISIS

Several adjectives have been used to describe the current Somali tragedy such as clan war, civil war, the war of the warlords and even that it all had its roots in the Somali culture. So far I have provide two facts that may help us to shed some light on the causes of the war, namely the crisis of Pan-Somalism and the collapse of the Somali civil society. I myself prefer to describe this conflict as an armed conflict motivated by and for the competition of the control of the state or influence its course of direction.

Regardless of whether the forces in question are Somalis or UN-American led forces, who now appear to be more interested in creating a government of their likening in the country, as opposed to one that commands popular support.

At the moment this armed conflict is no longer an inter-Somali war but has become a struggle between the UN forces and the supporters of General Aideed. We are dealing here with power and its attainment and ethnicity is used as a means to achieve that goal

Professor Cohen reminds us that "Ethnicity is used here as strategy by individuals to advance their personal interests and maximise power. The central question is earnings of livelihood, the struggle for a larger share of income from the economic system". Having said, I would like to say there is nothing magical and mysterious about the Somali clan system. The Somali clan system is similar to any other kinship system associated with pre-capitalist societies and their social organisations. As a residual category a clan is not a religion nor a cultural unit. What is new perhaps and more evident in the Somali experience is that both the Somali 'social contract' or 'Xeeriye' and the Islamic one have to some extent been out of balance since the imposition of the colonial rule perpetuating tension in the entire system.



## UNISOM2 AND GENERAL AIDEED

As regards to the confrontation between the UN-America led forces and the supporters of General Aideed. Most Somalis welcomed the decision of George Bush, the former President of the United States when he decided to intervene directly in Somalia by ordering 'Operation Restore Hope,' ostensibly at least to save the lives of many Somalis. There is no doubt that the operation did indeed save many lives, but its broader objectives which surely had to be the creation of conditions of normality were in complete and utter disarray.

1) A number of aid agencies and human rights organisations on the ground reported that even before the American forces had landed in the country on December 92, the civil war was petering out and only twenty percent of the aid was being looted. The UN representative in Somalia at the time the Algerian diplomat Mr. Sahnun had already won the confidence and the respect of the all warring factions as well as those of the community and religious leaders and a general reconciliation and agreement was very near. The continuous use of force by UNISOM2 and the resignation of Mr. Sahnun after his disagreement with the policy of the Secretary General Boutros Ghali halted both the peace process and the humanitarian work in the country. Recent bombardment of UNISOM2 of the civilian population where on occasion one hundred civilians were reported to have lost their lives with an unknown number of Somalis in detention camps, raise serious moral and legal questions about the UN operations in Somalia. By using excessive force, the UN forces in Somalia might have broken some of its rules, I am referring here to 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.

It was reported that during the 12th of June's attack on radio Mogadiscio, the UN forces destroyed it completely, along with archive tapes, in a department of the station which was seen as being of prime importance for a society that is heavily reliant on the spoken rather than written word.

On 12 August 26 None Governmental Organisations (NGOs) including Save the children, Medicine Sans Frontiers, Oxfam openly criticized UNISOM2 for increasingly concentrating on military rather than on humanitarian operations. The statement said "The use of military force erodes the spirit of trust and confidence which are preconditions for peaceful initiatives and dialogue keys to rebuilding Somalia". in a news paper article and a BBC radio interview the former British Prime Minister Sir Edward also endorsed the views expressed by aid agencies. The Italian Defence Minister Fabio Fabbri was even more critical in an interview with the Italian press when he said that Italians "Were not used to carrying out massacres.... we don't like Rambos and Italy could no longer remain the hostages of Admiral Howe".

It is unfortunate that at a time when the Somali people greatly need the help of the United Nations, the organisation has been ill advised on the Somali crisis and its complexity. I believe that there is no point in ignoring the facts any more. UNISOM2 must listen and reverse their policy in Somalia, and start honest political dialogue with Somalis and respect their leaders and institutions and return to the same strategy adopted by Sahnun the first UN envoy during the crisis.



### Conclusion:

The 'New World Order' has given rise to a Somali new order too. This Somali order dictates a new reality and a different set of priorities for the Somali people which makes necessary to give a fresh look at their affairs.

1) There must a period of self re-examination and self-reflection by all Somalis following this bitter and horrific experience.

2) There must now be a new strategy based on a peaceful settlement and action to establish grass-root democracy in each Somali territory so that normal condition can be created for a civil society to reproduced and lead the social change.

3) Co-operation between Somalis and other peoples and governments in the Horn must be encouraged. For instance, since the EPRDF came to power, The Somali people in Ogaden or Zone 5 have felt they are free and not second class citizens in their own country any more, although there are still some obstacles to overcome. Peace and development in this area will have an important impact on other Somali states since this area provides pasture and water for The Somali nomadic community and have been always a central preoccupation and concern of all Somali governments in the past.

4) Because of pain that has been inflicted on the Northern population by the oppressive regime of Siyad Barre where half a million people died or became displaced refugees, this, coupled with previous grievances are the main causes behind the withdrawal of Somaliland from the Union. This must not be seen as negative disruption but as a logical conclusion of this new reality. The Somali people in the Horn can still exist as a single historical and cultural social movement, since they have the same language, rituals, music and symbolism ...etc. However, they can have different sovereign states, at least for the time being.

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