

# The Emergence and Role of Political Parties in the Inter-river Region of Somalia from 1947 to 1960 (Independence)

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Somalia has enjoyed a unique role in the history of African nationalism. As the only country in Africa whose population is virtually homogeneous, most of the people speak a common language, all are Muslims and claim to be related to a common (or several common) distant ancestors. One might therefore expect that its independence movement would have been more unified than those of other African territories where tribal and regional differences came to be reflected in political party groupings after World War II. Also Somalia was the only country to be partitioned several times: once at the end of the 19th century during the scramble for Africa and again in the 1940's following the break-up of the Italian East African Empire. This would seem to have been another factor that unified Somalis in a sense of common nationalism.

However, the drive for Somali independence gave rise to not just one but several political parties. Were these parties based on regional or « tribal » differences of a particular Somali sort? Did they have different views of Somali nationalism and self-government? These questions are difficult to answer, not only because source materials are limited but also because one Somali party, the Somali Youth League (SYL), came to dominate the political scene in the 1950's and was the majority party at the time of Somali independence in 1960. As a result of the SYL's success most of the literature on Somali nationalism has focused on its organization, its leaders and its political platform. Scholars who have written on Somali parties in the pre-independence period have mentioned the existence of other parties and briefly described them<sup>1</sup> but very little is known of their leadership, their supporters, and their goals.

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This paper as presented at the III International Conference of Somali Studies was substantially longer and detailed, and has been edited for this publication.

<sup>1</sup> A number of scholars have written on the issue: Castagno A.A. « Somali Republic » in James S. Colman and Carl G. Rosberg (eds.), *Political Parties and National Integration in Tropical Africa*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1964, pp. 519-59; Lewis I.M., « Modern Political Movements in Somaliland I & II », *Africa*, Journal of the International African Institute, Oxford University Press, Nos. 3 and 4, 1958; Touval S., *Somali Nationalism*, Howard University Press, 1963; Punkhurst S., *Ex-Italian Somaliland*, London, 1951; Bullotta A., *La Somalia sotto due bandiere*, Milano, 1949.

This paper examines the emergence and history of one of these other parties the Hizb al-Dastur Mustaqil al-Somal (HDMS)<sup>2</sup> which was the most important opposition party to the dominant SYL through most of the 1950's in the trust territory of Somaliland, as well as in the 1960's after independence and unification, and which can be considered an important political movement in itself. Very little has been written on the HDMS, in part because of the scarcity of sources mentioned above, and in part because those who come in second rarely attract much scholarly attention.

## Background

When the UN General Assembly adopted its Resolution 289 on November 21 - 1949, placing Italian Somaliland under the international trusteeship system with Italy as the administering authority, it ended a period of great agitation among Somali political parties and began an era in which various parties and cliques jockeyed for power under the new trusteeship government.

Between 1946 and 1948 the British Military Administration (BMA) in Somalia (1941-1950) supported the SYL and gave it valuable assistance. One of the ways it did this was by providing SYL members with jobs and administrative experience. The majority of Somalis who were employed in the BMA administration, whether in military service or civilian administration, came from SYL.<sup>3</sup>

This policy of favoring SYL members as employees naturally created antagonism and resentment among members of other political organizations and factions and led to the formation of anti-British administration cells.

## The Emergence of Hizbia Dighil Mirifle (HDM)

Before 1947 the Somali organizations had limited political objectives, and were principally concerned with cultural and social questions. Only when the arrival of the Four Power Commission<sup>4</sup> was imminent did parties and organizations begin to formulate more explicit economic and political demands. The HDM was constituted on March 25, 1947. The party aimed at practical measures for improving the general welfare of the country, which included the encouragement of agriculture and trade, raising the standard of education and guaranteeing the peace.<sup>5</sup>

To « Hizbia » the country of Somaliland was divided into two major regions: north of the Shabelle river and south of it, speaking two noticeably different

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<sup>2</sup> Hizb al-Dastur Mustaqil al-Somal (Somalia Independent Constitutional Party), locally known as « Hasbia », emerged first as Hasbia Dighil Mirifle (HDM) the party of Dighil Mirifle. For further details on the formation of Somali political parties see Mukhtar M.H., *Italian Somaliland From Trusteeship to Independence*, Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of al-Azhar, Cairo, 1983, pp. 87-106.

<sup>3</sup> Four Power Commission of Investigation of the former Italian colonies, vol. II. « Report on ex-Italian Somaliland », 1948, p. 21, 107 and Castagno A.A., op cit., p. 525.

<sup>4</sup> The four Power Commission (FPC) was a product of long discussions between the allies, composed of the representatives of UK, USA, USSR and France. Designed to investigate the conditions and the future of former Italian colonies.

<sup>5</sup> Petition from HDM to the President of UN Visiting Mission to the trust territory of Somaliland. T/pet. 11/109, Oct. 2nd 1951.

dialects « Maai » in the south, « Mahaatiri » in the north. The « Hizbia » people practice mixed farming and pastoralism in the most fertile and prosperous region of Somalia. Thus there are important economic, cultural and linguistic differences between the southern population and the predominantly nomadic people of the north.

### **Party Politics in the Early Trusteeship Period**

When the return of Italy was imminent as the administering authority under UN trusteeship system, the political stability of the trust territory of Somalia was greater than expected. Neither the pro nor the anti-Italian organizations expressed their feelings towards the events. The SYL did not participate in the reception which the first Chief Administrator Giovanni Fornari held to meet the leaders of Somali political parties on April 15, 1950, though their leaders did lead a delegation to the tribal reception which followed two days later.<sup>6</sup>

However, several incidents did occur in Mogadishu and Baidoa between the Conferenza Party and SYL in the first instance (March 6, 1950)<sup>7</sup> and HDM and SYL in the second (April 17, 1950)<sup>8</sup> which could be interpreted as clashes between the pro and anti-Italian factions in Somalia. Both were trying to gain the support of the new Italian administration in one way or another. In the case of Conferenza and HDM they wanted to demonstrate their loyalty and allegiance to the administration, and the SYL hoped to gain publicity and sympathy and to pressure the authorities into regarding the party more favorably. But it was evident that none of the clashes had any ideological basis; they were merely matters rooted in tribal differences and the influence of colonial policies in the region, and also the tensions and insecurities that prevailed at the time of the transfer to the Italian administration.<sup>9</sup>

### **SYL Rapprochement with the Italian Administration**

The problem which Italy faced at the beginning of its administration clearly influenced policy in later years. Whether or not it opposed the influence of the SYL in the early days of trusteeship, it is apparent that by the mid-1950's the Italian government had achieved a rapprochement with the SYL. At the same time, during the years 1951-53, the SYL appears to have softened its attitude toward Italian authority and even established a positive working relationship with it.<sup>10</sup> How can we account for this seemingly dramatic reversal of SYL policies,

<sup>6</sup> « His Excellency the Administrator received the tribal chiefs, and other noble figures ..., Sharif Ali Zeno, ..., Herzi Farah, ... Haji Muse Bogor, ..., Haji Dirie Hersi », see *Corriere della Somalia*, issues 1710, 1711 of April 17-18, 1950.

<sup>7</sup> See telg. from Mr. Gamble, the Chief Administrator of Somalia to the Foreign Office, March 6, 1950. In FO 371/80886.

<sup>8</sup> See FO 371/80887, Appendix No. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Mukhtar M.H., op. cit., pp. 203-209.

<sup>10</sup> The second UN Visiting Mission to Somalia pointed in their report: « the party has taken a more conciliatory attitude towards the trusteeship administration, and is less concerned with the past » see T/1143. Useful information about Italo/SYL rapprochement see Martino E., *Due anni in Somalia*, Mogadiscio, 1955.

from an uncompromising anti-colonial, anti-Italian stance to a friendly working alliance with the Italian government? Was the new pro-Italian policy simply political, or did it reflect a new perception that the Italian trusteeship government was committed to goals shared by SYL? And what was the effect of the new cooperative attitude with Italy on first in the proliferation of parties, and later their eventual disappearance during the trusteeship period?

It could be argued that the policy of rapprochement with Italy was the only way SYL leaders perceived they could maintain the party's dominant position in the country. Having seen how the support of the BMA had contributed to its influence in the 1940's, they might have recognized the Italian support for another party could easily undermine its position. On the other hand, if the SYL genuinely represented the sentiments and aspiration of the majority of the Somali people, then it is difficult to see how compromise with the Italian authorities could have added significantly either to their prestige or influence in the country.

Ironically, it was at this same time that the HDM party, which is often seen as the most pro-Italian organization in the period of party formation, became the leading opposition to the SYL and to the Italian trusteeship.<sup>11</sup> The relationship of the SYL and HDM to the Italian government and to each other is reflected in the results of the various local and territorial elections that were held during the trusteeship years where HDM maintained the second position after SYL, which always took the leading position.<sup>12</sup>

### The Question of Decentralization

While there is a common and deeply-rooted belief in Somali society that all Somalis are descended from a single ancestor, there is little doubt that geography and history have created several distinct sub-cultures within Somalia. Scholars have shown how the deep-seated clan and lineage system of the northern pastoralists has been modified to include loyalties based on territorial proximity in the more settled communities of the inter-river plateau.<sup>13</sup>

Along these real differences in social organization were local prejudices which one finds in every society of the world. The northern nomads showed a scarcely disguised contempt for any occupation other than pastoralism, and they have traditionally looked down upon the southern cultivators as inferior. The southerners in their turn regarded the nomads as hot-headed and undisciplined, incapable of managing affairs other than their herds.

It is obvious that these social and regional stereotypes have played an important role in the formation of Somali political parties even though the most prominent Somali political leaders of all parties made efforts to eliminate tribalism and the preoccupation of the people with it.

<sup>11</sup> UN Visiting Mission, T/1143, and UN Advisory Council T/947.

<sup>12</sup> In the first Municipal Elections of 1954 more than 20 parties competed for 281 seats, HDM won 57 seats coming second to SYL which won 141 seats, the rest of the seats were divided between 9 other parties. In the first political elections of 1956, the competition was for 60 seats, HDM won 13 after SYL which won 43. In the second Municipal elections of 1958 HDMS won 175 out of 663 when SYL won 416. In 1959 HDMS boycotted the general elections, but allegedly won 5 seats out of 90 where SYL won 83 and Somali Liberal Party won the rest two.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis I.M., *op. cit.*, p. 253, and Virginia Luling, *The Social Structure of Southern Somali Tribes*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of London, 1971.

As an example of the persistence of tribal and regional sentiments we can look at the aftermath of the political elections of 1956. Four parties won seats in those elections: SYL, HDM, SDP and Marehan Union, with 43, 13, 3 and 1 seat respectively. Of the four, one of them had a distinctly regional following (HDM), one was distinctly tribal (Marehan Union), and one had just recently changed its name from the Mijertein Progressive League to the Somali Democratic Party. The fourth, of course, was the SYL, which never made strictly tribal or regional appeal but which in the minds of many Somalis it can be argued, represented tribal alliance of sorts under the banner of patriotism and national unity.

In addition, the formation of the first Somali Cabinet by the victorious SYL showed that the leaders were extremely conscious of ethnic-group composition, but almost totally ignored the Dighil-Mirifle portion of the population.<sup>14</sup> The Prime Minister (Hawiye) formed a Cabinet consisting of three Hawiye Ministers, two Darood, and one Dir. The Dighil-Mirifle received not a single ministerial portfolio. Moreover, when Parliamentary groups were formed, the three deputies of the SDP and the one of Marehan Union crossed the aisle to join the SYL as a gesture of group solidarity, leaving the HDM as the sole opposition in Parliament. This confirmed the northern tribal orientation of the first government.

These actions prompted the HDM to undertake a major campaign of criticism against both the SYL and the Italian administration. At the same time the party produced a new programme reflecting its future policy and changed its name to Hizb al-Dasuur Mustaqil al-Somal (HDMS).<sup>15</sup> The HDMS's campaigns and its more aggressive attitude to the governing party contributed to a growing misunderstanding between the Administration and the SYL on the one hand and HDMS members on the other. The later alleged discrimination against Dighil-Mirifle citizens in the Somalization process and in the allocation of educational scholarships for study abroad.<sup>16</sup> Tensions increased to the point where bloody confrontations occurred in various southern towns and villages inhabited by HDMS supporters following government attempts to impose heavy taxes on their farms.<sup>17</sup>

All these incidents contributed to a call from the HDMS for the decentralization of administration. Party spokesmen claimed that this was the only way to overcome the social and economic discrimination against inter-river inhabitants that they saw being practiced by the government.<sup>18</sup> Equally important, though, were the results of the first Somali census of 1957. While the census failed to obtain accurate results in the largely nomadic regions of Mijertinia, Mudug and Lower Juba, it had considerable success in estimating the population of Benadir,

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<sup>14</sup> It was suggested to form a multi-party Cabinet so that other parties could gain experience in executive responsibility; see Castagno AA., *op. cit.*, p. 532.

<sup>15</sup> Touval S., *op. cit.*, p. 92.

<sup>16</sup> Petition from the Central Committee of HDM to the head of Italian Government on July 24, 1955. In addition to the Central Committee, this petition was signed by other Dighil Mirifle councillors in the Territorial Council who belong to other parties. Copies of the petition were also given to the Administrator of Somalia, the Italian under Secretary of Foreign Affairs and UN Advisory Council; see UNTC T/Pet. 11/583.

<sup>17</sup> For more details about these incidents see United Nations advisory Council Report. AC T/1311, 1957, p. 21, and also UNTC 20th Session. 795th Meeting 20/5/57, p. 7. And also AC T/1372, 1958.

<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the party demanded that the Somali Constitution should be based on decentralization of administration. For more on this issue, see the inaugural speech of the party for its 11th anniversary March 25, 1958. See also T/Pet. 11/583, and UNAC T/1372, 1957-1957 par. 61, and also Touval S., *op. cit.*, pp. 36-97.

Hiran and Upper Juba regions. The results suggested that the population of these last three regions was greater than the other three, with obvious implications for representation in Parliament. However, both the Administration and the Government refused to conduct another census before the coming general elections, even though this course of action had been recommended by the Legislative Assembly.<sup>19</sup>

It is also highly probable that HDMS was encouraged to advocate a policy of decentralization by the inclusion in the Technical Committee for the elaboration of the Somali Constitution 1957 of a sub-committee assigned to study the possibilities of a decentralized federal structure for Somali.<sup>20</sup> Thus the party declared its intention to establish a Somali Federal Government, believing that a federal system was the only way to lead the entire Somali people to progress and prosperity.

The call for decentralization received support from the Somali Liberal Party and from the Somali National Union. The latter in fact advocated the postponement of the general election for the constituent assembly until 1960 and, in the event that such a postponement was not granted, they requested that a new constitution be prepared by the UN itself as a temporary framework for the elections.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

The paper highlighted the longly unstudied political history of the southern population of Somalia. It tries to reveal the neglected role of the inter-river societies in the development of Somali political maturity and demonstrate how they shared in the formation of the important Somali political parties. Abdulqadir Sakhaweddin, the founding father of SYL, Sheikh Abdullahi Bogodi the founder of HDM and Haji Muhamed Hussein the founder of GSL were all from the region. The HDMS was accused of being a tribal party, though they, in fact, represented for more than 20 years (1947-1969) the sole opposition party, especially in the period preceding independence. They raised important issues in Somali political development, such as: the necessity of undertaking a census of the Somali population as a basic step of development, the vitality of « al-Datuur » (the Constitution) as a sole way to a democratic political entity and the adoption of a federal system of government as the only way that Somaliland could be developed economically and socially. Finally it was the aim of the paper also to highlight the manipulation of the foreign powers, particularly the two retreating colonial administrations of Great Britain and Italy and their influence on the political development of the region.

<sup>19</sup> « ... in three regions Benadir, Upper Juba and Hiran there was a considerable degree of success; in the other three: Mijertinia, Mudug and Lower Juba there was a failure to obtain accurate results ... » see UNAC T/1372, 1957, p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> See T/1344, 1958, pp. 6-7.

<sup>21</sup> United Nations Visiting Mission to trust territory of Somaliland under Italian Administration T/1344, 1958, pp. 6-7.