

The Political Crisis in Somalia

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Over the centuries, crisis has not been unknown to the Somali people. One might say that ecological crisis has been the norm of the nomad's precarious existence. Since the end of the 1977-78 war, however, the crisis in Somalia has been particularly crippling, in part due to its multifaceted nature. Onto the regular cycles of drought and famine, there has been an enormous influx of war refugees. These refugees have put a burden on Somali society that can hardly be exaggerated: the Somali Democratic Republic (SDR) took it upon itself to provide food, water and medicine to these refugees, and it mobilized all its diplomats to urge their international contacts to respond generously to the refugee problem; the Somali government also put daily pressure on all of its Ministers to make available to the refugees all services possible; and no Somali family could reject in its home a distant relation who had lost his herd and all means of livelihood in the Ogaadeen war.

Somalia has also had to cope with the international oil crisis, and the concomitant inflation of prices on all imported goods. The consumer Price Index has averaged a 65 percent rise over the past seven years and the rate is increasing. For urban based families, getting sugar, meat, rice, charcoal, and other necessities has become a nightmarish burden. Finally, Somalia has faced in the past few years a grave political crisis. President Maxamad Siyaad Barre, who led the country through some exciting reforms in the five years subsequent to the fall of civilian rule in 1969, now finds that he has enemies everywhere. Political tensions are becoming as frighteningly intractable as the refugee

and economic situations. Although I remain at some distance from the SDR, and have not conducted serious political research there for some time, I think it is possible for me to provide a framework for understanding the political crisis in Somalia.

To be sure, the political crisis is itself a function of the ecological, refugee and economic crises. But it has its own dynamic as well. As I see it, the political crisis in Somalia revolves around three interrelated problems: (a) the exacerbation of clan tensions; (b) the resistance to democracy and the increasing harshness of autocracy; and (c) the loss of ideological vision by the leadership of the SDR. I will discuss each of these components separately; together they work to create in Somalia a crisis of political legitimacy.

The Exacerbation of Clan Rivalries

When President Siyaad first came to power, he seemed committed to the merit principle for advancement, and sought to eliminate clan membership as a criterion for success in public life. "It is not who you know," he had children chant everywhere, "but what you know." Siyaad's Marreexaan clan had been the lost brother among the Daarood clan-family; and tradition holds that Sheikh Daarood has punished Marreexaan by ordering him to bring his *reer* (extended family) to an area where he would be surrounded by rivals. In the early years of the Somali Republic, the Marreexaans tended to fend for themselves as a party, without making trans-clan alliances. Coming from a clan that did not have a commanding presence in the Somali state, Siyaad therefore had an interest in minimizing clan as a basis for advancement.

In the heady months after the revolution was born, Siyaad made cabinet appointments that seemed to tap talent from a wide source of clans. A prominent member of his ruling group came from an out-caste group, and there existed a general feeling in Somalia that the tribalism of the party system had been destructive to the society. Siyaad, through his attack on the politics of the Parliamentary years, was therefore able to emphasize the unifying aspects of Somali nationalism.

A unified Somalia unleashed the energies of the

Somali people in a way that was unimaginable during the civilian years. Siyaad was able to mobilize the Somali population; he instilled in his fellow Somalis a sense that collective action could yield private benefits. This was an amazing achievement because the prevailing ethos in the colonial years and during the period of civilian rule held that avoidance of the state could yield the most impressive private benefits. Mobilization meant that Siyaad could establish a national script for the Somali language and use that script to attain widespread literacy within the SDR. Students *willingly* went out to the bush to teach nomads how to read their language. Mobilization meant that the Somali people could organize themselves for the systematic eradication of smallpox. It meant that a variety of self-held projects could be both planned and implemented. By 1974, the economic position of the SDR showed considerable improvement over the course of the Revolution.

But the rise of internecine conflict among Somali clans eroded the mobilization. How did this happen? The President cannot be held blameless. From the early period of the Revolution, Siyaad exhibited what some would call paranoia but others a justifiable fear of the Majeerteen clan. The Majeerteens were the clan that held the key to power throughout most of the civilian era. They had developed an ideology that they had the right to rule based on their political finesse and administrative competence. Siyaad made allusions to his enemies among the Majeerteens in many of his early remarks. To confront his enemies directly, Siyaad found himself identifying them on the basis of their clan membership. In so doing, Siyaad (perhaps inadvertently) re-legitimated the language of tribe in Somali politics. In 1971, in response to an apparent coup attempt, he identified the rebels as members of three opposition clans. Whether or not these clans were supporting this counter-coup, the fact that Siyaad executed members of three leading clans again reintroduced the calculations of tribe in the Somali consciousness. In the wake of the economic and refugee crises of the past few years, Siyaad has resorted again to tribalistic techniques to hold onto power. He has been shuffling political appointees back and forth throughout the bureaucracy, and building ever new and changing

tribal alliances. This technique divides his enemies and of course heightens awareness of clan membership.

However culpable the President may be, social forces out of his control worked toward the reintroduction of the rhetoric of tribalism in Somali politics. Those clans — such as the Majeerteen and Hawiye — which had been key members of ruling coalitions before the 1969 coup suffered *relative* losses. Egalitarian policies necessarily appear discriminatory to groups that had been in the previous period the leading social strata. Their leaders interpreted their relative decline as persecution, and they sought to undermine Siyaad. Siyaad found himself fighting clan-based opposition by relying ever more for protection on members of his own clan. This was interpreted by the opposition as proof that Siyaad was a tribalist.

Other forces sustained tribalism. With scientific socialism as an ideology, the traditional trade with the Arab states faced all sorts of foreign exchange problems for Somali merchants. Socialism meant that there was greater government control over the banking sector. Merchants had more and more to rely on private loans and informal banking for much of their commercial dealings. This sort of trade requires greater trust between lender and borrower than does a formal banking system; and that trust was only available between clansmen. Furthermore, although I have no data to support this, it was generally felt that Siyaad's ministers made foreign exchange more easily available to Marreexaan traders than to traders from other clans. The socialist program, then, inadvertently helped to exacerbate tribalism.

Finally, the Ethiopian revolution in 1974 helped unleash the Western Somali Liberation Front in the Ogaadeen region in Ethiopia. The WSLF leaders attempted to mobilize their elders for the subsequent battle through the evocation of clan ties. Their use of clan imagery to mobilize against Ethiopia spilled over into the domestic politics in Somalia, as each of the clans in the Ogaadeen region had clan connections within the SDR.

This set of complex causes became self-sustaining. Today in the SDR, clan enmity is worse and potentially more violent than in any period of Somalia's history. A large part of the current crisis

can be understood in terms of inter-clan conflict. That even Siyaad's opposition is deeply divided by clan affiliations suggests that the social forces creating inter-clan tensions go well beyond the government of the SDR. It is a disease that has infected the whole society.

Political Autocracy

In 1969 General Siyaad disbanded the Parliament that had broken down into a chaotic assembly as it attempted to restore political order in the wake of the assassination of President Cabdurashiid. He did promise free and fair elections coincident with the democratic aspirations of the Somali people, but in the Second Charter of the Revolution, issued in 1970, there was no mention of elections. The denial of democracy in revolutionary Somalia has two components: the absence of opportunity of the public to participate effectively in the political process, and the growth of social control mechanisms by the central government.

Siyaad, in my judgement, was not completely averse to the idea of democratic reforms. In any event, he knew that the Somali people treasure the opportunity to participate in political discourse, and that they wanted reform. He did accept Soviet suggestions (something Mengistu has not done) to form a Socialist Party and to convene a Congress. Indeed in 1976 a Congress with some 3,000 delegates did meet. And in 1979 there was constitutional referendum, followed by elections to a National Assembly and Regional and District Councils. "Osman Mohamoud" in Volume 4, no. 3 of this journal has interpreted these moves as "fraudulent and cynical," and cites, for example, the fact that the total vote was larger than the size of the Somali population and that there were "crude techniques of intimidation" employed at the polling stations. Relying on the Soviets to bring about democratic reforms, the author implies, can hardly be anything but cynical. My interpretation of this sorry move toward democracy is that Siyaad wanted to fulfill the democratic aspirations of his people but did not want to pay the cost — that is, the possibility that he might be rejected by the people. He could not have accepted Abdi Sheikh-Abdi's sage advice in vol. 3, no. 3 of this journal

to move towards democracy by appointing a Prime Minister because he believed he was indispensable to the Somali nation. Megalomania rather than cynicism explains the failure to move toward democratic processes. Whatever one's interpretation, the facts are clear that in thirteen years of Siyaad's rule, the Somali people have not been given the opportunity to nominate and elect representatives who might provide alternate leadership.

The other component of autocracy concerns the growth of repression. The greatest achievement in institution-building in the SDR has undoubtedly been that of the security services. The USSR and East Germany have provided to Siyaad a service of inestimable value for purposes of social control — an institutionalized network of internal spies. To be sure, Siyaad is no Amin: he has not exterminated his enemies with ruthless ferocity. But he has jailed and intimidated his political enemies without giving them any opportunities to defend themselves. Mohamoud Hassan has, in vol. 3, no. 2 of this journal, enumerated sixty-one public executions in Somalia from the Revolution through mid-1980. The charges: "anti-Socialist," "anti-revolutionary," or "anti-government" activities could hardly stand the test of a fair trial. The arrest of seven leading officials in July 1982 demonstrated ever more clearly the intimidation on which the present government survives.

As if physical coercion were not enough, Siyaad's sycophants have tried to sustain the regime by turning their leader into a cult figure. Siyaad's quotations appear everywhere. Children sing his praises as "the father of knowledge," who gave them, through his revolution, their mothers. On the radio, it is reported that, "The secretary general of the SRSP, Jaalle Mohamed Siyaad Barre, delivered a *historic* speech after the elections at the congress." The speech, however, was a typical diatribe against colonialists, collaborators, chewers of qat and drinkers of alcoholic beverages. In the language of the current discourse among Somalis, while the regime once looked like a horse, it now sounds like an ass.

The Loss of Ideological Vision

Somali citizens for the most part were willing to

put up with a temporary suspension of democratic rights when the government had a clear idea of how the society ought to be directed. From 1969-74, there was an ideological vision that mobilized and excited Somali citizens. Military rule meant that corruption might be contained and problems which could not be solved due to political bickering among an endless number of political parties could finally be handled. The early anti-corruption campaigns were moderately successful in rescuing public property from private hands. And the choice of the Latin-based script for the Somali language ended an apparently interminable political debate. By 1970, a socialist program was conjoined with military rule. The search for a wider set of buyers for Somali bananas and the greater central direction of economic development choices followed. More schools were built, more roads were constructed, and more health centers were staffed in the early years of the Revolution than the five years preceding the coup.

By 1974, the socialist ideology had run out of steam. The regime began to recount its former successes rather than to give vision for newer goals. Of course, the regime began to exert considerable energy in the direction of "liberating" the Ogaden. This was most popular throughout the SDR, and to the credit of the regime, the ultimate battle in 1977-78 demonstrated that the Somali army as constructed by Siyaad had enormous fighting capability, as it took a massive infusion of Soviet aid to Ethiopia to repulse the Somali forces. In retrospect, the decision to give full military support to the WSLF was politically unwise. For my purposes here, I want to suggest that the decision sounded the death knell for the socialist program. From early 1975, when the regime's attention was focussed primarily on coordination of military activities with the WSLF, socialist rhetoric had little meaning. It became a device to keep the flow of Soviet weapons into the SDR. With the failure of the war effort, and no ideological vision of how to proceed, the absence of democracy can no longer be excused. Ideology, by providing people with a vision of what the sacrifices of any revolution might yield, makes the absence of democratic rights appear less of a burden. But autocracy conjoined with ideological vacuity cannot be tolerated.

Tribalism, autocracy, and loss of ideology are interrelated parts of the political crisis in Somalia. At war with each other, Somalis cannot play a constructive role either in national development or in international politics. In fact, the Somalis could become very much isolated on the world stage. No longer a colony of Italy and Britain; no longer a client of the U.S. or the U.S.S.R.; who would come to Somalia's aid if its autonomy were threatened by the Ethiopian militia?

How can this crisis be ameliorated? To that question I do not have a satisfactory answer. It seems to me, however, that President Siyaad has already made his contribution to the Somali nation, and that he should not play a political role in the reconciliation of the present crisis. It also seems to me that the opposition groups ought not to emphasize Siyaad's culpability. A considerable part of the crisis can be explained by forces beyond any President's policies. The 1977 war, for instance, which did so much to enhance tribalism and sap the state of its will to implement its socialist program, was an example of Siyaad being responsive to the popular desires of nearly all Somalis. Unity would be enhanced by focussing on the future rather than harping on the excesses of the Siyaad regime as it held on to power in its final years.

An opposition group that is able to attain power ought also to acknowledge the fact that Somalia is a society woven together with interrelated clans. Acknowledging what every Somali knows will enable the government more easily to overcome inuendos of tribalism (e.g. by allowing the government to publish the clan representations in a number of ministries). Of course, to acknowledge the existence of clans will compel any pretender to authority in the SDR to build up a widespread alliance of clans, and to overcome the clan particularism so evident in the opposition groups today.

Finally, it would behoove any group claiming the right to govern the Somali people to present to them a program for action that goes beyond the simple eradication of Siyaad-ism. This program should address the ecological crisis, the economic crisis, as well as the political crisis in the Somali Democratic Republic. It is somewhat presumptuous of me to be advising people whose lives are on

the line about what their oppositional program ought to look like. I do so only because I have been invited by the Editor of this journal to write on the political crisis in Somalia, and because an analysis of that crisis without a complementary statement

about how it might be overcome seemed to me to be irresponsible.

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