

A Brief History of the ‘Somali’ Union: What is the Way Forward?*

The former Republic of Somalia has been haunted by a problem called Greater-Somalism. Greater-Somalism is a politically motivated drive to unite all Somalis and Somali territories under a one-nation-state. It started in the 1940s as a movement to counter colonial powers and gained much popularity in 1960s. It looked attractive, because, in addition to the cultural nationalism, it also had religious and moralistic sentiments, that all muslims are brothers and sisters and therefore should unite; even more so when they share a common language, creed and culture. It was based on the view that Somalis have everything it takes to form a one-nation-state, and its credo quite simple: to bring all Somalis under one nation and one flag by consent, and if necessary by coercion. It was well captured by Dr. Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke in his statement:

Our misfortune is that our neighbouring countries, with whom, like the rest of Africa, we seek to promote constructive and harmonious relations, are not our neighbours. Our neighbours are our Somali kinsmen whose citizenship has been falsified by indiscriminate boundary ‘arrangements’ (quoted in Lewis, 1963:151)¹.

Dr. Sharmarke, the very person who verbalised in the best possible way Somalis yearning for unity was unfortunately assassinated in 1969. Nonetheless, his legacy in respect of Greater-Somalism lived on though it never had the same connotations nor a driving force of his status and his eloquence. It is still active today and despite the unilateral dissolution of the Union by the Republic of Somaliland in 1991, it has still many proponents. One of the main arguments for Greater-Somalism by those who still campaign for re-establishing the Somali Union in post-Dr. Sharmarke era is to disappoint Ethiopia, a country which they think has always sought to prevent Somalia from having an effective and strong national government. Somalis, they argue, cannot afford to be divided because of the eminent military threat, which Ethiopia poses to their existence. Based on moralistic sentiments they further argue that, in the vicinity of Christian Ethiopia, Somalis need to do everything to have a strong unified Somalia.

This central concern of this article is that the Union of Somalia was founded on the false dream of Greater-Somalism based on ethnicity and it simply existed not because of intrinsic values of its nationhood but because of its ‘Cold War Client’ status. The article raises serious questions about whether there was a nation-state in Somalia in the first place, and considers how the unswerving search for Greater-Somalism masked Somalia’s vulnerability as a nation-state.

¹ Lewis, I. M. (1963) ‘Pan-Africanism and Pan-Somalism’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 1, pp 147-161.

The Fragility of the Somali Nation-State

Since its inception, the Republic of Somalia had been unfortunate to have had access to limitless 'Cold War Funds'. But such moralistic sentiments disguise the ambivalent relationship among Somalis which eventually left them to love their nationhood to death. Ever since the formation of the Union in 1960, the former Republic of Somalia was an archetypal "Cold War client state" receiving aid from the Soviet Union in the 1970s, and after Somali broke ties with the Soviet Union in 1977, from the US in the 1980s (Gundel, 2002)². According to Weil (1993)³ with a per capita income of \$80, Somalia in 1970 was the sixth poorest country in the world. That figure has risen to \$150 in 1976. With the war against Ethiopia a year later, things got even worse, the country fell on flat face and in 1990 the per capita income was estimated at \$120. In an elaborated paper Menkhaus (1997)⁴ outlines how the whole edifice of the Somali national government infrastructure was a bloated cartoon polity swelled and over-aided out of proportion by readily available 'Cold War Funds'. He argues that after Israel, Somalia received the highest international military and economic aid per capita. Apart from the military power which made the Somali Military Government and its predecessor civilian government to build one of the strongest armies in sub-Saharan Africa, the rest of the international aid disappeared in bottomless perils in Mogadishu with no signs of improvement in the hinterland, a situation which earned the country 'the graveyard of foreign aid'. It is only because of the prevailing world political system that the Union of Somalia lasted for 31 years.

Armed to the teeth with Cold War weapons and filled with Greater-Somalism sentiments, Siyad Barre's Military Government invaded Ethiopia under the pretext to liberate Western Somali territories. Chanting *Kani galbay ku kale mooyee* (Somali for 'this war is over, which one is next'), the Somali army captured town after town. Siyad Barre's backers, particularly the Soviet Union, disagreed with his irresponsible war expedition, a situation which led for Somalia to break ties with the Soviet Union in 1977 and with that the military aid stopped. Within a few months it proved that Somalia's military government could not sustain the war, telling its army, as Jon Snow⁵ jokingly but tellingly put it, that 'the country run out of fuel' and Somalia's military might was left stranded in the heartland of Ethiopia.

² Gundel, J. (2002), The Migration-Development Nexus: Somalia Case Study, *International Migration* Vol. 40 (5)

³ Weil, R. (1993) 'Somalia in Perspective: When the Saints Come Marching', *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 57.

⁴ Menkhaus, K. (1997) 'U.S. Foreign Assistance to Somalia: Phoenix From the Ashes?', *Middle East Policy*, Volume 5.

⁵ Jon Snow, presenter at London based Chanel 4 News Television speaking at a fund raising event for a girls school in Buroa, Somaliland at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 2009.

Humiliated, some of the defeated army Generals returned to Somalia to take revenge on their commander-in-chiefs, Somalia's tried and tested (and often failing) version of 'Public Inquiry'. Bringing the war back into Somalia, they attempted to overthrow the irresponsible government, which sent them to an un-winnable war, and when they failed to topple the government returned to Ethiopia for a better preparation, forming in 1978 the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF). This was followed by the Somali National Movement (SNM) in 1981. Somalia regained its Cold War client state status when the US stepped in 1980. Still mistakenly believing in its military capability, the government replied in kind to the war brought by the incoming army Generals, killing its own people.

However, the opposition meant business. SNM fighters calling '*Faqash way tagaysaaye sii tukhaantukhiyaay*' (Somali for 'The Somali army is defeated, all it needs is tipping over') intensified their war against Siyad Barre's army. The United Somali Congress (USC)⁶, formed in 1989, answered these calls emanating from the then North (now Somaliland). It did the tipping over which also coincided with the end of the Cold War era, exposing Somalia's fragile state structure. As the final phase of the war intensified and brought to the doorstep of Siyad Barre's government, a group called the Manifesto visited USC's leader, General Aidid, begged him to halt the war to which the General reportedly replied 'it is too late to halt a war which started in Zeila now the frontline has reached Avizioni (in Mogadishu)' forcing Siyad Barre to flee the town in the most undignified way 'in the last functional tank' as Peter Pham⁷ put it .

When the first false premise on which Somalia's national government was based, i.e. foreign aid dried up in the early 90s, the Somali state structure simply imploded, the country descended into **Hobbesian war of all against all** and like an attention seeking child Somalia turned its deadly weapon against itself – self-harming. For a long time Somalis were the sole victims of their imploded nation-state. But the result of this long post-Cold War negligence is that Somalis have not only made their country dangerous for themselves to live in; they turned the strategic location of their country into a strategic problem to the international commercial maritime transport. Now the international community has to once again come to rescue Somalia, this time, from itself: women and children seek protection behind AMISOM troops from their own fellow Somalis; the Transitional Federal Government for its troops and police force from their fellow Somalis; and Somali business community maritime for its sea cargos from its own pirate boys. If the language, race or religion argument makes any sense it would have explained how this war of all against all in most of Somalia continues unabated.

⁶ For brevity only three factions are mentioned here. There are many more factions including the Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM) as well as none-affiliated individuals and general public who helped end Siyad Barre's rule.

⁷ Peter Pham, Somalia's New Prime Minister: Not Quite What the Doctor Ordered, accessible at: http://www.hiiraan.com/op2/2010/oct/somalia_s_new_prime_minister_not_quite_what_the_doctor_ordered.aspx

The victorious USC without consulting their partners in the war installed a transitional government supposedly meant to run the Union. That was the defining moment for Somaliland's history. Ordinary people in Somaliland became suspicious about how serious their partners in the Union were about the Union. More importantly, people in Somaliland realised that Somalis were not and still are not psychologically and institutionally ready for a centralised government and that a Union is something that they could ill-afford. Traditional leaders from Somaliland took the matter into their hands from the SNM generals in 1991 and decided that the restoration of colonial borders, and not the restoration of the Somali unity, was the way forward.

The December 2010 Djibouti Conference of Somali Scholars

Djibouti was the first Somali territory to opt out of the Union. It had closely studied the unfolding saga of the Union in mid 1970s and took what every reasonable Somali thought was a political miscalculation. But Djiboutians preferred to take a leap into the unknown than to join a wobbly Union. It paid off. Against all expectations Djibouti thrived. It is now well-placed to come to the rescue of their fellow Somalis who loved each other to death. Proudly standing in front of about 60 Somali scholars, President Ismail O. Guelleh instructed them to brainstorm about Somalia's problem and come up with a workable solution. Like no other leader, President Guelleh knows that Somalia and Somaliland would have been better off had they gone separate ways. He also knows well that restoring the Somali Union is a foregone conclusion. Yet, and it would not be surprising, if some said he was humming '*wax la waayay Waydow ninkii waalan baa u dada*' (Somali for 'only the insane looks for the impossible'), President Guelleh tasked the scholars to think and search for possible solutions. Unfortunately, they shied away from thoroughly debating and considering a two-nation-state solution to the Somali drama. Understandably, settling the Union drama by dissolving the unity is painful, but as appears from Somalia's turbulent history, there is a pressing need for those genuinely concerned about the Horn of Africa to consider the hitherto neglected and painful option of the two-nation-state solution.

The Pandora Box

It remains unclear as to why the scholars avoided to discuss a no-Union-approach which the very country that is hosting them has adopted. However, the majority of those who indulge in Greater-Somalism oppose the Republic of Somaliland's statehood wrongly argue that dissolving the Union will open a Pandora Box, i.e. that Somalia will disintegrate into smaller clan-based entities. But they fail to see why this fashionable Pandora Box argument they invoke had failed to materialise when Djibouti decided to stay away from joining the Union in 1977, the year Somalia's military government sent its troops on a costly expedition trip into Ethiopia. Similarly, they fail to see why Ethiopia failed to disintegrate into smaller entities when in 1993 Eritrea ceased to be part of Ethiopian. On the contrary, the one territory that would have followed suit, the Somali inhabited

region, integrated further in the Ethiopian federal system by removing from their flag the five pointed star against a blue background (Somali identity) which symbolised their aspiration to join the rest of Somalia and replacing it with a she-camel (their regional identity) against a yellow background (Ethiopian identity). Further, no one is holding hostage the aspirations of the South Sudanese people by invoking that the rest of Sudan will fall apart if they [the South Sudanese] opt for separate statehood. It is therefore unclear as to how and why dissolving the Somalia-Somaliland union would this time around lead to further breakdown of the region.

New Directions

The dependency on foreign aid continues to-date with all the fifteen plus peace conferences Somalis have seen since the collapse of the central government in 1991 were all funded by donor nations. The argument that the frantic search for reestablishing the central government in Somalia is, according to this view, simply because there is the illusion of foreign aid bonanza of the Cold War magnitude will resume once more (Mekhaus, 1997). But many observers begin to understand now that the Somali homogeneity, **if not a problem in itself, failed as a unifying force**. The Somali irredentist idea was too ambitious while the norms and values of modern state were still alien to the Somalis who are unable to curb in their 'Somaliness' sentiments. Somalis are not psychologically prepared to be united for the sake of it. Nor are they willing. The blind search for a one-nation-state for Somali speaking people in the Horn will surely only prolong their suffering.

No wonder that now the stand of some of the international community is shifting towards the realisation that the likelihood of re-establishing a sustainable unified central government in Somalia is next to impossible. To many who are genuinely concerned about the plight of the people in the Somali peninsula it has become clear that the problem of the loss of the Union is secondary to the problem of whether a nation-state can indeed be built on the much invoked linguistic, creed and culture and religion criteria. If that were the case we would have seen a one Arab nation-state. It has not happened in the Arabia peninsula, neither can one expect it to happen in the Somali peninsula. For, there are many people who fit the criteria, but are perfectly happy with having other nationalities than Somali. Uniting all Somalis under a one nation-state, an idea that is still current in the former South (now Somalia) is and has been 'a political stalking' which Somalis need to review. It does not hold. For, if Dr. Abdirashid A. Sharmarke had been troubled by Somalis whose nationality were falsified, about 50 years after his eloquent statement on Greater-Somalism, his own son, Mr. Omar Sharmarke, proud of his dual identity and nationality as a Somali-Canadian, was in 2009 appointed as TFG's Prime Minister. Mr. Omar Sharmarke is part of a new generation whose identity and nationality is hyphenated and whose acquisition of foreign nationalities is brought about by the very ideal which Dr. Abdirashid A. Sharmarke stood for: Greater-Somalism. Greater-Somalism led to civil war, to refugee crises sending Somalis around the globe and finally to the dissolution of the Union.

The important lesson one can draw from this development is that ethnicity and national identity are separate factors which are not sufficient nor absolutely necessary for the building of a nation-state.

Now, contrary to the popular view that the South dominated the North, or that the pre-1991 Mogadishu-based semi-literate government systematically oppressed people from the North, which to some extent is of course true, former Somalia's problem is the unthought through plans to unite all Somalis, whilst this lineage-based people have never known any form of a central authority. The union came generations too early and as the situation currently stands a two-state solution is the best way forward.

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*This article is part of an ongoing work the author is doing on the process of political thought formation and nation-state building in Somalia and Somaliland.