

Somalia: beyond the quagmire

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The election of the moderate Islamist leader Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed as the new president of Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) creates a window of opportunity for the shattered east African country. But what happened [1] in Djibouti on 31 January 2009 must be followed by constructive and creative political action if it is to yield its potential benefits.

The chances of this now hang in the balance, as Sheikh Sharif's return to Mogadishu on 23 February was followed by an eruption of violence involving [2] government forces, African Union peacekeepers and militia groups. In this difficult political moment, who are the key players now confronting each other in Somalia, and what outcomes might - and should - emerge?

The Transitional Federal Government

The TFG has since 2004 had been the incarnation of some kind of international legitimacy for what is left of Somalia's central polity, could very well be the major casualty of the ongoing process. Since the power-sharing arrangement established in October 2008 - brokered between the "old" TFG and the moderate wing of the Islamist Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS-S), led by Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed - the recycled TFG had been in a state of deep crisis [3].

The Ethiopian government did its best to support what had been its main ally and champion in Somalia since 2004-05, but it was ultimately defeated by the inordinate obstinacy of the TFG president [4], Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed. Abdullahi did not want the new alliance with ARS-S; he did not want any arrangement with the Hawiye traditional elders who wielded so much influence in Mogadishu; and in the end he did not even want his own prime minister, Nur Hassan Hussein "Ade".

What did Yusuf want? At heart, his own Majerteen yes-men and nothing else - not quite the broadening agenda everybody (including Ethiopian prime minister Meles Zenawi [8] and the international community) wanted him to embrace. Addis Ababa gave up and left him to his own devices. Yusuf, completely isolated [9], finally resigned on 29 December 2008; he eventually left Somalia on 18 January 2009 to take up residence [10] in Yemen.

This left prime minister Nur "Ade" holding the fort of an increasingly crumbling phantom administration. The withdrawal [11] of the Ethiopian army in December 2008-January 2009 meant that the TFG's area of control in and around Mogadishu shrank, and did its influence in central [12] Somalia. Most of its army deserted [13] - the United Nations said 10,000 out of 15,000 (though it was more 1,500 out of 4,000 if the real troop numbers rather than the salary

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rolls are examined); and large swathes of the country soon fell into the hands of what the media had come to call the al-Shabab (youth, with the connotation of militant) - for want of a better word.

The ensuing election for the presidency saw sixteen candidates standing - including prime minister Nur Hassan Hussein, ARS-S Sheikh Sharif, former prime minister Ali Mohamed Gedi, one of Siad Barre's sons, and several warlords (Mohamed Qanyare Afrah and Mohamed Said Hersi "Morgan" among them). Sheikh Sharif finally emerged as president-elect.

But this result also represents a huge problem in terms of Somali clan politics - for Sheikh Sharif is a Hawiye from the Abgal sub-clan, which leaves the Darood clan family (one so vast that around 65%-70% of Somalis belong to it) outside power. The al-Shabab tend to recruit well among Darood, saying - rightly- that both the TFG and the moderate Islamist camp are Hawiye preserves. It is not possible to run the country on the basis of TFG alone, and Sheikh Sharif now has to build a broader alliance. On what basis and with whom, nobody yet knows. If no governing alliance emerges [13], the TFG might very well simply wither away, in fact if not in name.

The Islamist constellation

One of the many problems of today's Somalia is that almost everybody is an "Islamist" of some kind. There are for example:

- The so-called al-Shabab, the direct descendants of the radical branch of the Islamic Courts Union that was forcibly removed by the Ethiopian occupation [26] of December 2006. Their leader, Aden Hashi "Ayro", was killed in a United States air-strike in May 2008. Al-Shabab (youth) is an elastic word - during the war against the TFG army and its Ethiopian allies, everybody became an al-Shabab member. Some al-Shabab [27] were in fact clan-based militias operating under the Islamist banner; others were debris of a number of former warlord militias yet more were linked to the radical branch of the ARS holed up in Asmara under the leadership of Hassan Dawer Aweys (ARS-A); and remnants were ARS-S
- As the al-Shabab rolled on, they conquered [28] ground and often had to let it go almost immediately because they did not have enough men to garrison the towns they had just occupied. They left behind nominal "al-Shabab" militias that in fact did not obey them. From a clan-based point of view the al-Shabab hard core was Hawiye. But as it grew it quickly differentiated itself according to clan - with for example Mukhtar Robow ("Abu Mansur", who is a Rahanweyn of the Lissan sub-clan) recruiting his own men from his own clan, calling them the "Mujahiddin Youth Movement" (MYM). The Harti of Ras Kamboni created their own movement called Anole

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- The ARS-S of Sheikh Sharif [29] tries to use the al-Shabab without being itself swallowed by them. It has built an alliance with other moderate Islamist groups under the revived name of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC)
- Hassan Dawer Aweys and his ARS-A are opposed to the new president and sponsor some elements of the al-Shabab. He runs them inasmuch as his Eritrean friends give him enough money and weapons to keep them in line; but the control is far from tight.
- The old *Ahl as-Sunna wa'l Jama'a* ("the people of the law and the community") - the middle-of-the-road Islamist movement created in 1992 by the late Mohamed Farah Aydid when he was fighting the Americans - still exists. It is deeply opposed to the al-Shabab, and is now being armed by the departed [30] Ethiopians who see it as a counterfoil to the radicals. *Ahl as-Sunna* is a potential ally for Sheikh Sharif
- There are also all the freelancing Islamists who at times call themselves al-Shabab or at times invent fancy names for themselves. Their allegiances are vague and tend to be of a more clan-based nature.

The various components of the Islamist movement have taken to fighting each other as they come to occupy more ground. In late January 2009, clashes multiplied around Dusa Mareeb between the al-Shabab hard core and *Ahl as-Sunna wa'l Jama'a*. Each denounced the other as *kufar* (infidels) and each has proclaimed *jihad* (holy war) against the enemy. When the "al-Shabab" occupied the TFG capital of Baidoa on 27 January, it was in fact a group of MYM under Mukhtar Robow who walked in unopposed because their fellow Rahanweyn welcomed them. They discreetly omitted calling in their comrades from other clans.

The fighting has extended to Mogadishu, where at least twenty-one people were killed and dozens wounded on 24 February 2009 in clashes [31] which involved al-Shabab and a new self-declared militant formation, the Party of Islam.

Yet all this is far from adding up to the picture of a "talibanised" Somalia. It should not be forgotten that the Taliban are Pashtun, members of Afghanistan's majority ethnic group. The al-Shabab are a minority because in Somalia everybody is a minority nationally; majorities - like the Issaq in Somaliland or the Majerteen in Puntland - exist only locally. This does not mean that some kind of a radical Islamist government cannot emerge. But it means that such a government, if it sticks to a radical agenda which was not that of the more mixed and moderate [31] UIC of 2006, will never control the whole country. A more moderate Islamic movement perhaps could, on the basis of an inter-clan alliance.

The international component

The direct international involvement in Somalia is for the time being limited to the 1,600 troops of the Ugandan army and the 1,700 troops of the Burundian army. Both operate under an African Union (AU) mandate within a force called the African Union Mission in Somalia [31] (Amisom). President Yoweri Museveni has promised an added 700 men "soon". But he has also requested the African Union to pay him \$14m for the "depreciation" suffered by his military equipment in Somalia.

Amisom troops have a very low level of military efficiency, and cannot do much either to protect the civilians or to bolster any kind of a political solution. At times, they seem to have a hard time protecting themselves.

In December 2008, when it became obvious that the Ethiopian army was going to withdraw, the Americans made a belated effort to convince the United Nations [32] to put together some kind of a military mission for Somalia. Ban Ki-moon asked but everybody refused - even the Turks who had initially seemed interested. The general verdict was "too risky".

The Amisom troops are now isolated, scared, and increasingly drawn in to violent confrontations. On 2 February, after an improvised explosive device was detonated against one of their convoys, they lost all control and opened fire on the crowd: thirty-nine civilians were killed and twice that number wounded. The fact that the UN representative, Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, tried to deny the massacre did not help.

The al-Shabab and their sympathisers - which had in any case welcomed the new president's election by declaring war on him - lost no time in accusing Sheikh Sharif of having betrayed his people and allied himself with troops who were behaving no better than the former Ethiopian army. The word *jihad* came up and Sheikh Sharif now has to face a new and broader alliance of fundamentalists, spurred on by Amisom's murderous blunder. The killing of eleven Burundian soldiers from Amisom in Mogadishu on 22 February 2009 is an index of the scale [33] of his task.

The humanitarian debacle

The International Committee of the Red Cross [45] (ICRC) warned [46] on 24 February 2009 of a humanitarian crisis in the central region of Galgadud. The situation there is a stark example of a general trend. Today in Somalia, 3.25m people need humanitarian assistance. 170,000 people have fled Mogadishu since the beginning of the insurgency in 2007 and there are now over 300,000 internally-displaced persons (IDPs [47]) living in makeshift camps strung along the road between the capital and Afgooye. The Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya - opened in 1991 in the chaos [48] that accompanied the fall of Siad Barre (who had ruled the country since 1969) - now hosts 230,000 refugees, 60,000 of whom have arrived since January 2008. The levels of malnutrition are shocking and diseases are rampant.

The World Food Programme [49] and its NGO allies can barely manage, for a number of reasons: transport is horrendously difficult and dangerous. radical Islamists target [50] humanitarian workers who are regularly killed or taken hostage, money is very tight for what looks like a lost cause (see Jeffrey Gettleman, "The Most Dangerous Place in the World [51]", *Foreign Policy*, March-April 2009).

The "other" Somalia: Puntland

Puntland has fared surprisingly well in the midst of all this turmoil. On 8 January the Puntland parliament elected a new president of the quasi-state, a 63-year-old banker called Abdirahman Mohamed "Faroole". He is the first non-military president of Puntland since the quasi-state was created and quite a pragmatist [52]. He is also Ise Mahmood by sub-clan (in

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Puntland 96% of the population is Majerteen; so what matters is the sub-clan) - a welcome change from the previous Osman Mahmood hegemony over the administration.

In contrast to Somaliland, Puntland has never formally proclaimed its independence, though "Farole" has refused to take part in the Djibouti TFG electoral process, claiming - quite rightly - that this is both confused and tending towards a Hawiye closed-shop system. He says he would be ready to discuss a streamlined national administration provided the process would be more open, which for Puntland means a bigger Majerteen input.

In domestic terms he has promised to fight the massive inflation of the local Somali shilling and to act decisively against the notorious pirates who sail out of the Puntland port of Eyl. If this promise is kept it could win him the sympathy of the international community; though some observers accuse him actually of being linked with pirate interests. In any case this is a delicate balancing-act since the pirates now have a lot of money and weapons, and are in a position to defy [52] the authority of the quasi-state (see Roger Middleton, *Piracy in Somalia: Threatening Global Trade, Feeding Local Wars* [53] [Chatham House, October 2008]).

The new president and his cabinet [54] (whose members took the oath of office in Djibouti on 22 February) might also want to curb the smuggling of refugees into Yemen, a highly dangerous traffic which has killed 949 people out of about 50,000 transportees during 2008. Smugglers often get rid of their human cargo near the Yemeni coast by tossing [55] their passengers into the shark-infested waters in order to avoid being caught by Yemeni coastguards.

The "other" Somalia: Somaliland

Somaliland is now more hopeful than ever of gaining international recognition, as it counts a number of supporters in the Barack Obama administration. But this outcome is still quite far from being sure. In seeking to confirm its hallowed democratic credentials [55] Somaliland is now preparing for a global election (presidential + legislative) where the ruling party Udub is likely to win - but only by the narrowest margin, as in 2004 where President Daher Riyale Kahin won by 0.01% of the vote.

Kulmiye, the main opposition party, is likely to be a strong contender with the other opposition party Ucid coming third. The paradox is that the opposition cannot agree on a unity candidate because the two opposition parties together would be likely to poll more votes than the ruling Udub but will lose due to their division.

The quasi-state [56] is under threat from Islamist destabilisation efforts. The fact that Somaliland is quite solid means that all the terrorist groups which have been operating come from either the south or even farther afield [57]. In January 2009 the police arrested a group of several Somalo-Americans from Minnesota [58] who were in possession of ten shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles apparently supplied by Eritrea to the southern Somalia Islamist groups. Terrorist attacks cannot be ruled out during the election period, given the fact that many of the southern groups are strong supporters of the "greater Somalia" ideal and therefore hate "breakaway" Somaliland, whom Islamist leader Hassan Dawer Aweys always calls in his official documents (in an echo of al-Qaida propaganda [59]) "the state supported by the Jews and the Americans".

Somaliland [59] is still engaged in a low-intensity conflict with Puntland over control of the Sool and Sanaag regions where Puntland-based oil companies have been operating (although no oil has been found, it is quite likely that there is some). The registration of voters for the Somaliland elections in the two provinces has also proved to be a highly contentious exercise; this led the election commission on 23 February 2009 to postpone [60] the vote scheduled for 29 March to an as-yet unspecified date.

The way ahead

In many ways Somalia seems to be going back to square one, i.e. to the situation that existed before the disastrous CIA-sponsored coup of early 2006 followed by the Islamist takeover, and then in December of that year the Ethiopian military occupation. Clan-based militias are again springing up everywhere, camouflaged under a thin veneer of the now fashionable Islamic fundamentalism. The suicide-bombing in Mogadishu on 24 February that killed [61] fifteen civilians is in this respect an awful warning of what may develop in the absence of political progress.

The main problem of the surviving TFG is not going to be controlling the al-Shabab whose radicalism - though destructive - is largely self-defeating. It is much more going to be the age-old problem of herding together fissiparous clan militia elements intent on the local control of the limited cash-making opportunities: the harbours, the airports, the *qat* traffic, the refugee traffic, piracy and the looting of humanitarian aid.

The TFG does not have a tax base and cannot acquire one without achieving the physical control of at least some of these cash sources. But the international community is unlikely to be both willing and able to provide it, along with the necessary means to achieve this primary state objective; the aid it offers will remain largely humanitarian.

In addition a short-sighted view of security will push the international community to insist on a continued or increased Amisom presence. This would be a mistake. Amisom does not have - and will not acquire - the military capacity to make a strategic difference. But it acts as an irritant and its support for Sheikh Sharif and the TFG is a deadly embrace: while incapable of really bolstering the government militarily, it kills civilians in its clumsy "counter-insurgency" attempts, thereby providing "nationalist" arguments to the Islamist radicals who accuse the new president of betrayal.

It is urgent to withdraw the Amisom troops from Somalia before their counterproductive efforts destroy the very thing they are supposed to foster: the birth of a transitional national-unity government working towards a realistic peace that can endure. The people of Somalia - resilient, creative, intelligent, resourceful, long-suffering - deserve no less.

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