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Research Paper

A DECENTRALISED POLITICAL SYSTEM IS LIFE FOR THE SOMALI MIDNIMO:

A CASE OF SOMALI POLITICAL SOLUTION

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Content

Abstract

The case of decentralization in Somalia has been a contentious issue since the collapse of the Somali state in 1991. Following the collapse of the Somali state which followed the military dictatorship between 1969 and 1991, almost all Somalis advocated for some kind of decentralization as the centralised system they had before has been seen as what it let to the devastations and the collapse of their state.

This paper will try to look at the case of why Somali would prefer a decentralisation system, rather than a centralised system which has been detrimental to their concept. The paper will try to connect Somali *midnimo* culture with the Somali preference of a decentralised system.

Introduction

After three decades since the collapse of the state, Somalia is still reeling with what type of decentralized system suitable for her. Constitutionally, Somalia has been a federal state since 2012. However, the system has been reeling with the conflict between the central and the federal states.

Federalism was agreed in 2004 in Embegathi with Transitonal Federal Governemnt (Charter) and finalized in 2012 Constitutional Conference. Despite that Somalis have agreed to form a federalism system of government in 2012 as it has been declared in the Provisional Constitution of Somalia, it has been very slow in finishing the constitution. It is not yet clear when will the Somalis settle.

The problem lies at the heart of Somali *midnimo* (unity) as it requres to be looked at what caused the 'sacral' Somali concept of *midnimo* (unity) to disappoint the Somalis. This paper will further assess to led what reversed the Somali *midnimo* and how the Somali problems could be solved within a nation framework.

The Midnimo Concept

The *midnimo* concept is based on Somalism. This, in turn, has its roots in the feeling of national consciousness which focuses on the shared heritage of Islam, belief in a common ancestor, language and culture and, beside the geographical continuity of the areas they inhabit. It is the most important political unit in the traditional system. Clan membership is the traced through the male line to a common male ancestor from whom the group takes its clan name. Through this patrilineal, the genetic genealogy system enables all Somalis to relate to with each other.

The language creates a feeling of unity, a unity which has sacral characteristics. This feeling focuses on base of the Somalism. As the Somali *midnimo* has its roots in the oral tradition of Somali culture, the interiorising force of their oral word relates in a special way to the sacred, to "the ultimate concerns of existence" (Ong, 1982). Thus, for the Somalis, *midnimo* cannot be violated (*midnimada Soomaaliyeed waa muqaddas)*. This makes Somali nationalism, in the words of I M Lewis, "...tailor-made, and their problem was not that of nation-building, but of extending statehood outside the frontiers of the Somali Republic to embrace the remaining portions of the nation" (Lewis, 1980).

Internal Blow: The Breakdown of the State

Scattered over a territory covering nearly 600,000 square kilometres in the north-eastern corner of the African continent, the notion of *midnimo* allowed the Somali-speaking people survive for centuries and to form one of the largest single ethnic groups in Africa. Yet, the sacred *midnimo* faced the challenge of the twenty-first century. The heart of the dilemma lies in the system of government, which Somalia took at the beginning of the modern state. The state selected by Somali political leder has a centralised and it was a system an alien system of government introduced by European colonial powers.

When the lineage's number increased, it was more likely that subgroups developed. When the clan or the community expanded to new localities they used to set their elders or community leaders to look at their affairs. This gave the clan or community the autonomy to manage their affairs and also to provide their members with secure, close relationships.

The new system of government, which was introduced after independence has reduced drastically the control of the local community over their own affairs.

The modern Somali nationalism provided a mechanism to transform the cultural nationalism to political nationalism. This new trend also predicted a new form of the notion which has transformed the autonomous and harmonious Somalism to a strict form of centralisation. The psychological environment fashioning the feeling of Somalism was the mechanism behind this determination. Behind this, the concept of centralisation was based on the often misinterpreted Somali notion of *midnimo* (unity), often called Somalism.

Misconception of the Concept of Midnimo

What led to the current problem is believed to be the misinterpretation of the concept itself. *Midnimo* is often misinterpreted and distorted until it has failed to be what it should stand for. The drive of unifying the missing territory has been interpreted to putting Somalis under a very rigid, centralised system. This not only led to frustration, but also contradicts the Somali traditional culture.

The diversity of the ecological and economic conditions compelled most Somalis to lead a scattered life in either pastoral, agricultural, or town dwelleres. All these types of living shared a similar culture. This cultural bond is the basis of Somali egalitarianism which is based on equality on the ground such as social experience, economic and social lifestyles that did not create separation. A predominant oral culture that tends to unite people so that people can cross their boundaries to identify with each other with a language that fosters unity.

This type of life made Somalis to live widely dispersed and consequently to lack the necessary organisational form needed to form a single political unit. The centralisation of the system of government has also affected the essence of traditional authority as well as the type of authority which was replaced during the formation of the modern Somali statehood. How has the impact been developed?

The Erosion of the Traditional Authority

In spite of the fact that Somalia's nightmare came into focus in the last few decades, it is believed that it had begun in the closing decade of the nineteenth century. This had not only resulted in the partition of Somali territory, but also had left behind a centralised system of government alien to the Somalis. Traditionally, Somali political authority was spread throughout the community, as there was no centre for political control. Clan leaders dealt with people politically on a face-to-face basis, and were responsible for all affairs concerning the clan and its relations with other clans. They claimed no rights as rulers over their people. The clan leader had not much executive

power (Kapteijns, 1993). Somali egalitarianism is encapsulated in the right of every man to have a say in communal affairs. After lengthy discussion and analysis of the matter concerned, a decision in the *shir* is decided by consensus.

During the late 1930s to 1960s lineage politics were manipulated to serve the political needs of the colonisers. A new form of hierarchy was introduced, and chiefs, called *caaqils*, were appointed by the colonial administration to represent and speak for the clan lineages. This process was to undermine the local authority. These subordinate *caaqils* were used as political representatives of colonial authorities as they were paid a stipend by the colonial administration and given other concessions. These spokesmen were, generally, for obvious reasons of convenience and availability, drawn from the urban areas. The colonial masters paid them and as a result undermined the traditional source of authority (Lewis, 1980; Samatar, 1988). This also weakened the integrity of the community harmonious relations and enforcement of peace for "the common good among local groups was replaced by a high public political profile of a socio-economic nature" (Sadia, 1994).

Traditional chiefs, thus became marginalized. Such social changes, which saw the influence shifting from traditional (rural) leaders to new urban leadership, were to have an impact on the modern Somali political leadership.

While the ability of the traditional assemblies to influence decisions grew steadily weaker, power shifted to modern political leaders who were not up to the communal responsibility. These new leaders, living away from the communities were free of the traditional pattern of constraints and became less and less accountable for their actions.

This new political culture created a type of leader who was more concerned with personal power and aggrandisement. Such a person, physically and socially removed from the traditional power base, felt free to operate unchecked by the clan, and this lack of responsibility to his constituents was not compensated for by a more general, though essential, sense of responsibility to society as a whole that should accompany public service. This degeneration in standards of responsibility had paved the way for the subsequent leadership crises during the military era, and in the period of disintegration of the Somali nation-state.

The civilian government, which ruled Somalia in the 1960s, did not change much of what they had inherited from their colonial predecessors. They gave priority and sometimes paid salaries to the "townie" clan representatives.

The military regime, which came to power in 1969, followed a similar policy. In addition to that, it created their clan representatives called *nabaddoon* and *samadoon* (peace-seekers). Clan manipulation was also a mark of the regime as the policy became a political instrument whose effect on the Somali public was to build up resentment among other clan groupings. The regime set a two-tier system, one which rewarded some sub-clans for their loyalty to the *Kacaanka Barakaysan* (the blessed revolution), and the other to persecute and repress those sub-clans "for their recalcitrance or reluctance to be enthusiastic about the new order imposed upon them." (Siciid, 1993).

Illusionary View of a Misleading Policy

Clanship remained a major force in the Somali politics since 1940s. This influence did not abate with modernity as claimed by some scholars and intellectuals. This view has raised many debates which continue until today. According to I M Lewis and Said Samatar, Somali leadership, including the intellectuals, failed to realise clanship influence over Somali politics. The kinship group or lineages are the building blocks of Somali society and it is the one which has the Somali socio-political identity.

During the independence struggle, the nationalistic mood influenced a trend which was to get rid of the clan name which was the traditional way to address themselves openly. This influence was also evidenced in the Somali modern poems which had a major role in moulding the nationalist mood. The view of the new educated elite which had developed in this period was influenced by the new trend. According to Abdullahi H Adan, the civilian government's approaches "were essentially designed to preserve, rather than upset, the political balance that grew out of the nationalist agitation of the 1940s and 1950s" (Adan, 1997). This gradualist approach to social and economic change could not satisfy the populist elite dissent, political manifested by "ameliorative political demands (reformism) versus revolutionary opposition" (ibid.).

These illusions of denying their social engineering mislead the national policy and social expression. In the end, it ended up with various Somali governments to create a false impression to deal with the social reality (example, the "ex" rhetoric to hide clan identity). For some leaders, this was a cover-up policy while the kinship influence played their policy.

Redefining the Midnimo Concept

Leading a decentralised lifestyle is the tradition of the Somalis and the current crisis has led them to realise how far it is important for them to regain what belongs to them. This also reflects Somalis' loss of confidence in their politicians. This last influence has awakened in the Somalis the need to take part in the political life of their country.

The civil war, which ensued after the ousting of the military regime, created a situation that forced people to return to their clan "areas". Once in their safe area, these people began to feel the need for some other essential requirements or services. Thus, these requirements and the underpinning social intercourse could not be possible without a regulating body or institute. It was this need which brought the creation of some administrative bodies in some parts of the country. It is this same feeling which has pushed Somalis towards decentralisation.

Somali culture offers some clues on how best Somalis can survive. Somalis led a decentralised life for centuries. A mechanism for decentralisation is possible when there is a system based on regional autonomy or state (canton). The principal based is a bottom-up approach, which maintains procedures built from the grassroots.

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During periods of social or economic turmoil, societies experience an identity crisis. In such a situation, "people endeavour to reconstitute their identities and social meaning by articulating and identifying with alternative discourses" (Laclau et al, 1985). Following the breakdown of the State, Somalis did not give up trying again to reconstruct their lives. In spite of the fact that the *midnimo* has experienced its downfall since the creation of the state, just recently it took to a new turn which may be re-awaken. This is what can be referred as a resuscitation of the *midnimo*. And some of its development may be witnessed how the Somalis have been trying to respond to the collapse of their statehood.

Somaliland was the first to attempt to regenerate *midnimo* in 1991, followed by North-eastern Regions in 1992 (later Puntland in 1998), and Bay in 1995.

On 18 May 1991 the Somali National Movement, which had taken control of the Northwestern regions, declared the regions as an independent Somaliland Republic. They argued that its action was not secessionist but rather the reinstatement of the status which existed for four days, 26-30 June 1960, before British and Italian Somalilands were united into the Republic of Somalia.

Their bold effort can be perceived as having two effects: that of trying to reshape or redefining the *midnimo* as well as drawing themselves into a no-way-out situation. This is more evident when Somaliland tried to define it as what had constituted the former British Somaliland (formerly North Western, Awdal and Togdheer regions).

The second course of action for the resuscitation of *midnimo* came on 21 December, 1991, when Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) leadership, the traditional religious leaders, intellectuals and politicians of the North-eastern regions (NER) agreed to form a regional administration under the leadership of former Police Chief (1960-1969),

In August 1998 NER joined with Sool and Eastern Sanaag regions to form a new administration. Representatives from these regions agreed in Garowe to call the new administration the Puntland State of Somalia.

The third attempt to redefine the *midnimo* happened between 26 February and 19 March 1995 when traditional leaders, elders, intellectuals and women's organizations of Digil and Mirifle community met in a conference to answer the pressing needs for security and basic social services following the breakdown of the Somali state. Nevertheless they succeeded to create South West State (SWS), as the third federal Members State of Somalia in 2004, comprising Bay, Bakool and Lower Shabeelle regions with Brava as its capital.

The type of federal structure proposed by the Conference of Digil and Mirifle for the future Somali state is based on "four states" divided among the main Somali clans (ibid.). For the Digil and Mirifle communities, the notion of decentralisation goes beyond their resolution of 1995. During the independence struggle of 1940s and 1950s, the Independent Constitutional Party, known also as Hisbul Disturul Digil & Mirifle (HDSM), advocated a federal system for the Somali nation. HSDM represented the southern region, ethnic people, namely the Rahanweyn, Digil, Bantu and Arab communities (Issa-Salwe, 1996).

Conclusion

Any solution, unless it is based on today's reality, is prone to fail or possibly to complicate and intensify the conflict. One of the main causes of Somalis' present dilemma is mistrust. Events in part of the country show their commitment to rebuild their nation. This is what can be referred to as the resuscitation of the *midnimo*. If this current process fails, the reality shows, that the Somali most cherished *midnimo* will be gone forever. At worst, the Somali nation will be fragmented as some parts might be assimilated by other states, while others will have to face the new reality to form their independent state.

The trust and legitimacy of the political authority lie at the grassroots level as this is the level at which the recreation of the state should begin.

As mentioned above, Somali culture offers some clues about how best can survive. Leading a decentralised lifestyle is the tradition of the Somalis and the current crisis has led them to realise it is important for them to regain what belongs to them. This also reflects Somalis' loss of confidence in their politicians. This last influence has been awakened in the Somalis and so needs to take part in the political life of their country.

As mention above, Somali political authority was spread throughout the community, the centralisation structures have severed the course of authority. The central government was expected to appoint the local authority. In this case, the local administration structures do not drive from the explicit consent of the local people but depend instead upon the endorsement of a higher political authority. This alien system exasperated when the central government abused the system.

The process of resuscitating the *midnimo* opens a new opportunity to recreate the Somali nation in a new structure of modern governance which balances the various communities throughout Somalia. Rejecting centralised rigidities which led to the chaos and opting for radical decentralisation is a foundation, not a luxury but a survival kit. Only a fully federal system (with fiscal freedom) which allows the people to govern themselves at the most local level as appropriate can give the Somali the promise of a news hope and peaceful future.

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