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REVISITING MODERN SOMALIA: FORGETTING THE PAST MEANS RELIVING IT

DISCUSSION

Revisiting Modern Somalia:
Forgetting the Past Means
Reliving It

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ANELISTS



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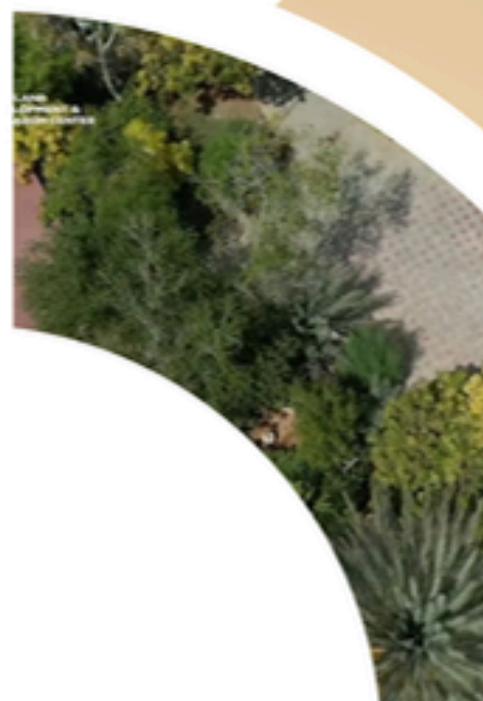
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BACKGROUND: REVISITING MODERN SOMALIA: FORGETTING THE PAST MEANS RELIVING IT

In March 2019, the **Puntland Development and Research Centre** (PDRC) initiated a monthly event dubbed PDRCTalks. This event is a new initiative to disseminate views, messages, and awareness-raising on issues related to Somalia's betterment. These cover topics including governance, democratization, peace, and development, which are key PDRC focus areas. PDRCTalks is a value-addition component of PDRC's vision as a solutions-oriented organization that prides itself on offering useful tools to promote peaceful coexistence and economic development for and by all Somalis.

PDRCTalks is an interactive platform that hosts prominent Somali scholars, veteran politicians, and retired civil servants once a month as guest speakers to deliver expert presentations at a uniquely themed talk event at PDRC. PDRCTalks aims to stimulate dialogue within the Somali community and, through this constructive discourse, change attitudes and lives. Social media is used to disseminate views and messages across Somali communities in the diaspora and within the country via live streams. PDRCTalks events have been well-received and have featured prominent figures in Somali society, bringing to the fore a multifaceted range of topics in politics, economics, social issues, and cultural themes.



This report presents the outcome of the PDRCTalk 33 deliberations, which aimed to facilitate a discussion on Somali culture, language, and governance, with a focus on inclusion and representation. Against this backdrop, PDRC held the 33rd PDRC Talk at the PDRC compound on October 2, 2025, featuring **Professor Mohamed Haji Mukhtar** as the guest speaker. The professor was born in Hudur on June 13, 1947. He is a historian who attained his PhD from **Al-Azhar University in 1983**. He was a lecturer at the Somali National University and taught for many years at universities in America. On September 13, 2025, Mukhtar was elected Chairperson of the National Academy of Maay Culture & Sciences. He has published more than sixty articles across different disciplines and has written several books, the most notable being *Historical Dictionary of Somalia*, *The Research Methodology of Somali History*, and *English-Maay Dictionary*.

ORGANIZATION OF THE EVENT

The 33rd PDRCTalks event took place on October 2, 2025, at the PDRC compound in Garowe, Puntland State, Somalia. The event featured a lecture by the keynote speaker, Professor Mohamed Haji Mukhtar, followed by a panel discussion and an audience Q&A. Furthermore, live streaming and other social media outlets amplified the event's reach and impact. Diverse audiences appreciated the event for its unique importance to various sectors of Somali society, including policymakers, practitioners, political activists, women, and youth. Participants included officials and experts from the government, civil society groups, human rights and advocacy groups, youth politicians, and knowledgeable citizens.

Before the professor took the floor to present his discourse, the facilitator highlighted the professor's biography and invited several important personalities to offer their welcoming remarks. **Mr. Abdinasir Mohamed Yusuf, the Executive Director of PDRC**, welcomed the professor and explained the importance of the PDRCTalks, noting that the platform began in 2019, almost six years ago. He added that the platform is designed to facilitate the integration of Somali people, bringing together individuals from different regions to meet in Garowe. Moreover, hot topics in politics, social development, and related areas are discussed at the forum, where people engage with each other and keynote speakers such as Professor Mukhtar are invited.



Ahmed Mohamed Sheikh Adam, elected council member of Garowe district from the Southwest State of Somalia, welcomed the professor to Garowe, telling him that Garowe is a safe haven for people from his region, where they are thriving and have many businesses

KEYNOTE REFLECTIONS BY PROF. MOHAMED HAJI MUKHTAR



For many years, we have said that Somalis share the same culture, yet they also have distinct subcultures. To empirically investigate cultural differences among Somalis, the Maay Academy of Culture and Science was established in Baidoa to further study Somali culture and traditions. History is very important; knowing one's history allows one to correct past faults, promote and improve one's positive history, and learn from it. This approach is called revisionism, which means changing, criticizing, and disproving things long held to be true—to revise the past history of the Somalis if faults that can be changed exist. Revisionism is based on research findings and data, not on turning previous mistakes into new ones based on personal preference, and thus offers an alternative.

Examples of the Usefulness of Revisions

The use of the words "Somalia," "Somalis," and "Somali" over the last hundred years has been debated. Until 1972, Somalis did not have a written language; they were entirely an oral society. When the first Somali script was developed in 1972, Somali writers, mostly from nomadic pastoralist regions, wrote books with stories such as Dhagdheer and Egal Shidad and called them Somali stories.

Stories and Proverbs

The written and adopted stories and proverbs are based solely on a nomadic, pastoralist society. The animals mentioned are those of the pastoral environment: lions, hyenas, foxes, camels, etc. Animals found in settled, agrarian societies are absent: elephants, giraffes, crocodiles,

deer, antelopes, etc. Thus, a reader of these books would assume that Somalis share only one kind of story and proverb. Animals such as rhinos, elephants, giraffes, and crocodiles, found in areas inhabited by agrarian Somalis, are excluded. When a Somali person from an agrarian background reads them, they do not feel these stories belong to them. These stories are specific to regions such as Central, East, West, and North Somalia—all nomadic regions.

Somali Poetry (Gabay)

Similarly, poets such as Sayid Mohamed, Ismail Mire, and Timacade are considered Somali poets and are rooted in the same pastoral environment. Only speakers of Af-Maxaatiri can fully understand them. These poets were compiled by individuals from the pastoral community. Among these are Aw Jama Omar Isse (Sayid Mohamed Abdulle Hassan Songs), Ahmed Farah Idaja (Ismail Mire songs), Elmi Bodhari (Rashid Mohamed Shabelle), and Tima'adde (Bobe Yussuf Du'ale).



State-Building in Somalia

Before 1956, apart from culture, there was no common Somali state; each group governed itself with its own administration, customary law, culture, and economy. Somalis gained statehood under Italian colonial rule and trusteeship. The first elected government was formed in 1956 to govern southern Somalia. It was called **Governo De La Somalia (GS)**. While it was called the Somali government, only one region held most executive seats. Four of the seven executive positions were held by members of the Hiiraan region, especially Buulo-Barde and Beledweyne. The remaining three were from among the rest of the Somalis. This caused resentment among the Digil and Mirifle communities, who were excluded from representation. Likewise, most regions of Somalia did not receive representation in executive positions. Therefore, it is hard to call it the government of Somalia because only one region held most of the executive posts, including the prime minister and the speaker of parliament.

Somali Alphabet

In addition, Somalis who speak the Maay dialect cannot use the Somali alphabet currently in use because it lacks six sounds used by Maay speakers. Therefore, we need to avoid calling them "Somali" stories, poets, or scripts, as they belong only to people who speak Af-Maxaa-tiri. It is necessary to be specific and say "Af-Maxaa-tiri," as it does not represent all Somalis from different dialects and cultures. The phonetics of Maay and Af-Maxaa-tiri are different; a person who speaks Maay cannot pronounce letters such as C, KH, and X, so they cannot use the Af-Maxaa-tiri script. Consequently, they created their own script called the Maay script. Therefore, Somali writers must avoid generalization and be precise. Instead of saying Af-Soomaali, they must specify Af-Maxaatiri and Af-Maay. Instead of saying "Far Somali" (Somali script), they must specify "**Far Maxaatiri**" and "**Elif Maay**".

In **1960**, when northern and southern Somalia gained independence, they united and formed the Somali Republic. Again, the independent government was formed on the same pattern. The three highest executive positions—the President, Prime Minister, and Speaker of Parliament—were held by individuals from only a few clans—Hawiye, Darod, and Isaaq, respectively—and this pattern continues to this day. Thus, we cannot call it a government for all Somalis, as power distribution is unequal across regions and clans. Repeating the same mistakes from 1956 to today underscores the urgent need for change to bring Somalia lasting peace and development.

Homogeneity and Somali Identity

Somalia has often been depicted as a pastoralist, nomadic (camel-herding) society. This camel culture breeds discrimination. Examples include 1) farmers are called "Qotto" (diggers), 2) fishermen are called "Jaaji" (mocked as irrelevant), 3) blacksmiths are called "Tumaal" (despised), and 4) women are denied the right to sit under the communal tree. For a cohesive society, these imposed stereotypes must be revisited and rejected. Other countries with different languages, cultures, and religions have built durable states that live in peace. Therefore, the question remains: Why does Somalia—one people, one language, one religion, one religious sect—destroy itself? Why do Somalis kill, loot, and rape fellow Somalis who are also Muslims?

In conclusion, he emphasized that Somalis should embrace cultural diversity, which is a source of pride and prosperity and reflects divine wisdom, as Allah created human beings different in color and language. He advocated taking concrete steps toward linguistic inclusivity, historical accuracy, and a fairer political system to strengthen the Somali state. He ended by saying that, if Allah willed, He could have made humans in one prototype, quoting a number of Koranic verses as well as a Maay poet named **Abdulle Isaaq**.

PANEL DISCUSSION AND Q&A

The PDRCTalks platform is designed so that the audience and the keynote speaker, aided by a panel of experts, engage in two-way interaction, which is central to the discussions. The second part of the session (panel discussion) offers an opportunity for participants to interact with the guest speaker, express their views, and ask questions.

Three panelists were invited to the stage, namely **Professor Mohamed Haji Mukhtar**; Professor **Mohamed Saed Samatar**, an economist from the diaspora who has served as an economic consultant to the Puntland government for the past 30 years and was also a lecturer at the Somali National University before the collapse of the Somali government in 1991; and Jamila Saed, who has worked with international and local organizations and served as the Minister of Women and Family Affairs of the Federal Government of Somalia.

Professor Mohamed Saed praised how Professor Mohamed Haji Mukhtar summarized the presentation



without sacrificing content. However, Professor Saed argued that it is difficult for a country to adopt multiple dialects as official languages. He cited examples from England, Spain, and Italy, noting that all three countries have different dialects but each chose one as the overarching official language. For example, England adopted Shakespearean English, and Italy adopted the dialect of Dante Alighieri.



Therefore, Somalia should also choose one of its dialects, as these other countries did. It is not logical for a country to have multiple official languages. We should either take Maay or Maxaa-tiri as the official language.

Jamila Saed shared a personal story about visiting Hargeisa and Baidoa at a young age and not fully understanding the languages spoken by people in these cities. She added that even Somalis who speak the Af-Maxaa-tiri dialect sometimes do not understand each other. However, she noted, we adopted the dialects of nomads who are tough and do not see women as equal to men.

Responding to a question about the nation-state, Professor Mohamed Haji Mukhtar said Somalis copied the nation-state ideology from Germany and Italy, countries built on a one-nation-state ideology. He believes the destruction seen in World War I and World War II was caused by the nation-state model, which enforces one boundary, one language, one color, and one history, and that this is also why Somalia collapsed in 1991. Most of the power in the Somali government and in higher positions has been held by people who speak the Maxaa-tiri dialect, resulting in the imposition of this dialect on all Somalis who speak other dialects. The reason the Maxaa-Tiri dialect was chosen was that of the 15 members of the committee that drafted the Somali script, only one was from the Maay dialect.



The professor added that in 2003, at the **Mbagathi Peace Conference in Kenya (2002–2004)**, Somali factions accepted the two dialects of Somalia, Maay and Maxaa-tiri, and included them in the Provisional Somali Constitution under Article 5. However, even now, 22 years later, the federal government has not released any official writing in the Maay dialect. The Maay language was not included in the curriculum. The Maay language is now written, and it is the responsibility of the Somali Federal Government and Federal Member States, such as Puntland, to include it in their curricula.

The professor explained that, regarding state-building, although federalism is a widely used system around the world, including in America and other developed and developing countries, the way Somalia's member states practice it is counterproductive. Therefore, he proposed that the existing six regional governments should elect their respective governors and trade with one another, rather than challenging one another, as is currently the case.

*Source: Public Commentary by Prof. Mohamed Haji Mukhtar
Chairperson of the National Academy of Maay Culture & Sciences, Baidoa, SWS*

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