

## Unity and Secession in Somali Political and Traditional Contexts

By: Liban Ahmed , April 28, 2006

Somali unity once was a reality; it has been reduced to an ideal that is as elusive as the secession attempts. That people who speak the same language and profess the same creed find it difficult to think through state collapse politically rather than traditionally is not an enigma.

Since independence Somalis have been reluctant to give the state a vote of confidence. The absence of a popular confidence in the state—manifested in the desire to mistake wishes of ethnic group for nation and institution building—has subordinated the Somali statehood to tribalism, and has made it easier for the state to become a criminal in “oppressing the people.” To the progressive observer of the Somali political scene this characterisation may sound a ‘traditionalist’ interpretation that professor Abdi Samatar criticized in his 1992 essay “The Destruction of State and Society in Somalia: Beyond the Tribal Convention,” when he wrote:

“The logic of traditionalist discourse leads to the conclusion that the trouble with Somalia is the nature of its culture, grounded in the clan system, with cruel individuals proving divisive for projects of modern nation-building. However, this approach offers no answer to the following question: since the lineage system has been [a] part of Somali social organization for centuries, why has this society not engaged in nihilistic fratricide before? Surely, there must have been power-seeking individuals in the past?”

Passing judgment on the Professor’s attempt to put the last nail in the coffin of traditionalists’ thesis depends on the temporal emphasis one places on analysing state collapse in Somalia. The strongest criticism professor Abdi Samatar makes against the traditionalist thesis is about “lack of historical specificity in the use of key concepts, notably pastoralism and culture.” The Professor is right to point out the weakness in traditionalists’ thesis but fell of short of applying ‘historical specificity’ yardstick to the question he posed to undermine the traditionalist thesis: “Why has this society not engaged in nihilistic fratricide before?” Somalis did not have a unitary state before July 1960. The level of state and social destruction to which Professor Abdi Samatar refers in his essay was magnified partly by the politicization of social differences and dictatorial misuse of state apparatuses. In the Somali oral tradition one can find poems depicting instances when action of individual leaders had led to communal bloodshed.

The post 1990 destruction in Somalia was “nihilistic fratricide” but the motivation was partly traditional: to capture the reigns of a state power in order to advance clan interests. There are both traditionalist and transformational elements in Somalia’s state collapse.

### Origins of anti-union sentiments in Somalia

Northern Somalis who united unconditionally with the Southern Somalis showed dissatisfaction in 1961, one year after the union. How can the young generation make

sense of Somalia's predicament? More than 70 per cent of Somalis have either lived under civilian governments as children or were born after Somalia's brush with parliamentary democracy came to an end. Despite scholarly writings on Somalia, one has to rely on unwritten personal reminiscences of civil servants or members of parliament who had first hand experience of what it was like to live in a Somalia when it was a satisfactorily democratic country. Miscommunication does constitute a major part of the Somali imbroglio. It stems from either the seemingly perennial misunderstanding between our politicians or absence of politicians who have broken free of the limiting shell—tribalism. What did the Somalia's first generation of politicians do to address the questions that 1961 referendum had thrown up given the fact that "the government suffered defeat in the SNL[\*] areas". In the words of Jama Nuh Abdulla, a Somali poet and an educator, "this discontent, purely political, was clearly expressed in different types of poetry by the Northerners... [;] their Southern brothers never heeded the cause the least to correct what went wrong."

Why was the task of articulating people's wishes left with artistes using coded language? From July 1 1960 to October 21 1969, Somalis had a democratic government. At least four privately owned newspapers such as Dalka, La Tribuna and Hargeysa Herald Tribune and Al-Jamahir existed to publish hard-hitting articles and commentaries that gave the governments of the day a hard time. Unlike the military dictatorship, the pre-dictatorship Somali civilian governments allowed a space for 'political discourse' and dissent. The Northerners' dissatisfaction was left to fester to a point where being dogmatic about unity or secession is unnecessarily fashionable among Somalis.

If the northern Somali politicians did not address the problems that 1961 brought to the fore, the southern Somali politicians had irresponsibly missed an opportunity to acquire an understanding about the anti-union sentiments brewing in the 'north'. The tribal politics that permeated the new polity made Somalia's first generation of politicians blind to the factors that were to bring Somalia's parliamentary democracy to an end. Writing in Dalka, now-defunct English language independent, monthly magazine, in 1965, Abdullahi Ali Dualeh highlighted how tribalism had begun to coexist with the new republic:

"Tribal intrigues and rivalries which... [were] traditionally settled through the test of physical strength now find subtle expression in the workings of party politics. Tribesmen who took pride in their numerical strength came to boast of having so many high-ranking officials and ministers."

The tribalisation of Somali politics provided an unexpected springboard for the military to stage a bloodless coup in 1969 after Abdirashid Ali Sharmaarke, the president of the civilian government, was brutally assassinated in Laas Caanood. For 21 years Somalis have lived under a military dictatorship that, despite its early achievements, evolved into an oppressive regime known for a reign of terror that cost the lives of countless innocent Somalis. Somali National Movement was one of the armed opposition groups that brought 21 year dictatorship to an end. It was the organisation behind the secession movement out of which 'Somaliland' emerged in May 1991. Having turned its back on a

key article in SNM constitution—“protection of the unity of the people and land of Somalia” -- SNM leaders and subsequent party political leaders in ‘Somaliland’ have not presented a convincing rationale for the secession despite the failure of the unity- based political systems in Somalia. Proponents of unity and secession ideals cling to those ideals without critically looking at contradictions and shortcomings inherent in each ideal. In other words tribal considerations outweigh political considerations and open mindedness. The cause for such common attitude towards the two ideals has got much to do with different conceptions about the sort of non-oppressive state under which people can live. Does this fear of clan based dictatorship determine the type of response a Somali unionist or secessionist gives when asked the question: Are you in favor of unity or secession? “Within the Somali sociopolitical context there are hardly any countervailing structures or institutions capable of preventing the repetition of a monopolistic appropriation of power,” argued Professor Martin Dornboos.

How should we look at the question of secession in Somalia?

Generally secession is either consensual or unilateral. In the case of Somaliland there is no agreement on which category ‘secession’ falls into because it is the outcome of the state collapse in Somalia. Triumphant SNM leaders have visualized the declaration of independent Somaliland as the best opportunity to correct mistakes leaders of Somali National League and United Somali Party committed when they united with the Southern Somalia “unconditionally”. Another narrative that has become bedrock of the secession argument is about excessive human rights violations committed against SNM supporters at the height of military dictatorship in Somalia. There are two dominant theories of secession. “Remedial Right Only Theories assert that a group has a general right to secede if and only it has suffered certain injustices, for which secession is the appropriate remedy of last resort. Primary Right Theories, in contrast, assert that certain groups can have a (general) right to secede in the absence of any injustice.” The first theory is, to some extent, applicable to ‘Somaliland’ despite the tension that will emerge from particularizing human rights violations vis-à-vis one social group.

The success of ‘Somaliland’ evident in presidential and parliamentary elections is not only commendable but it has also put in place a neglected rights based framework for discussing Somalia’s prolonged problems. The secession ideal has thrown up a major question that Somali politicians have got to grapple with: can Somalis share durable political institutions? Failure to pose relevant questions will plant seeds of state failure in the womb of any unitary or secession based polity.

At the heart of unity and secession ideals are dubious territorial questions. “Can the Republic of Somaliland fall short of statehood and still enjoy at least the same rights and privileges as the Palestinian Authority with a less hawkish ruling party than Hamas?” asked Professor Ali Mazrui in a lecture at Hargeisa University. Somaliland Administration is laying claim to all the territory in what was known as British Somaliland. . Fatah formed Palestinian Authority is not laying claim to all territories in what, under the British, was known as Palestine. Neither unity nor succession will be the right ticket because both ideals are not couched in political language. When the first

Republic of Somalia was formed people shared basic narrative. Most Somalis make different sense of the nation's recent, turbulent history. Traditional narratives hardly facilitate a new thinking about persistent political and social problems that bedevil Somalis. It is time to explore a new framework for discussing merits of unity and secession ideals undogmatically.

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\*Somali National League was one of the major political in the ex British Somaliland.  
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