

Somaliland: Is clan-based politics inevitable?

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Introduction

It is evident that clan politics is undermining the stability of Somaliland and challenging good governance and citizenry. Clan-based politics harbour nepotism, favouritism and corruption. Instead of delivering services to the public, politicians invest time and energy in bribing middlemen and enriching themselves. Clan leaders are given money and privilege, and businesspersons are awarded luxurious government contracts. Senior government officials and employees are rewarded to supporters. Clans compete hard and bitterly to gain the power to rob.

The ill-fated collapse of Somalia created a vacuum in 1991. The rebel movements that ousted Dictator Mohamed Siad Barre lacked political legitimacy and organization to fill the space. It was clan leaders who stepped in to salvage the people of Somaliland from the wreckage. The celebrated traditional bottom-up approach achieved to end wars and established the government of Somaliland (Shinn, 2002). In all conferences held in Somaliland from 1991 to 1997, clan leaders spread headed (Walls, 2002).

Clan based politics

To realize the envisioned one person one vote system, political parties were created in Somaliland (Pham, 2012). The formation of a multiparty system was seen by many as a transition from the clan-based selection process to a popular

voting modern democratic system. The political parties formed after the 2001 constitutional referendum impressed continuation of clannism. The political parties are not an amalgamation of like-minded people rather they became forums for competing clans.

The progressive speed made by Somaliland by holding consecutive elections in 2002, 2003 and 2005 were slowed down and ushered despair and utter disappointment. Elected officials failed to deliver services and fulfil promises. Politicians adopted the new situation and moulded the system to serve their interest. Clan loyalty has been used to get votes. Somaliland never again conducted an election on time. The second phase of democratization faced unprecedented challenges.

The 2017 presidential election was the most worrisome one. A polarizing campaign largely based on clan identity was lodged by two competing parties, Waddani and Kulmiye. Nothing was new in the campaign. However, a culmination of polarization and divisions cultivated by politicians in a decade manifested itself in an ugly face.

The question is: is clan politics inevitable reality to live with? There is an argument asserting that Somaliland is a hybrid system and should continue being so. Others contend that mixing modern democratic architecture with the clan system will not work.

Clan system is largely accused of taking lion's share in the demise of Somali state (Bulhan, 2008). The clan system is patrilineal (Bulhan, 2008). Members are connected to another through "genealogies which children learn by heart" (Lewis, 2002). Clan elders (Suldun, Boqor, Garad and Aqil) lead "clans, which are the largest defective political units (Lewis, 2002). Clan is not the only factor that can gather political bases or common vision. But it remains to be strong one.

Somaliland constitution limits the number of political parties into three. In every ten years, an opening of new political associations is allowed to compete for becoming political parties in the coming ten years. The purpose was to restrict clan divisions and avoid fragmented numerous political parties that divide the society and ignite hatred. Limitation of parties to three was viewed by the drafters of the constitution as a solution to prevent violence.

However, clan persists to be strong in politics. A clan may not be itself a bad thing. An attempt made by Dictator Siad Barre to eliminate clannism failed partly because one cannot force society to abandon identification they have been using in centuries. And Siad himself needed the clannism to perpetuate his rule (Bulhan, 2008). Hence any suggestion to coerce abolishment of clan identity is neither democratic nor possible. Nevertheless, clan-based politics remain to be a challenge to Somaliland's democratisation.

The contention that the clan system can live with constitutional democracy is proven wrong by the ailing political system of Somaliland. The country once praised being a success story of Africa, is descending into a political stalemate. The ills and weaknesses require urgent solutions. Elected or appointed politicians are not answerable to the public. Constitutionalism and rule of law are almost absent, and checks and balances are replaced by a powerful executive.

Day after day, the clan leaders are gaining more power. They are able to gather support for candidates, fundraise and mobilize voters. No candidate has shown strength to directly reach voters without the facilitation of clan leaders. Such force of the clan leaders has further divided the public. The narrative is no longer service delivery and performance, but rather power-sharing measured with how many positions each clan has in the government.

Calestous Juma [wrote](#) in 2012 “the last 20 years of Somalia have shown the dangers of ethnic competition and underscore the importance of building nations around ideas rather than clan identities.” Juma elaborates that in Africa “the absence of efforts to build genuine political parties that compete on the basis of ideas, many African countries have reverted to tribal identities as foundations for political competition.”

That is the case in Somaliland. Political parties are founded on clan but not on ideas. As Juma rightly puts, “tribes are not built on democratic ideas but thrive on zero-sum competition.” In a poor and divided country like that of Somaliland, such games are dangerous and could ignite devastating and deadly inter-clan conflicts.

The political leadership in Somaliland should recognize that they have an obligation to think about the future of the people and strive towards solidarity and unity. Divisions and corruption will not help sustain Somaliland. A political system based on clannism will be short-lived. In 27 years, Somaliland is still struggling to attain international recognition and building strong public institutions. The current political impasse over the delay of the upcoming parliamentary elections is an indicator of the lack of institutions to resolve disputes within the legal framework. Retired politicians are attempting to offer good office as the distance between the parties is widening and no apparent system of conflict resolution is on the horizon.

Located in a volatile region, Somaliland should be vigilant and self-aware of the risks accompanying with wrong political moves and poor judgements built on personal gains. Post conflict state formation is mostly bumpy, and secured gains can swiftly reverse. Politization and clan endemic in all branches of the state puts in this unrecognized and struggling country in a difficult situation. Clan leaders have been playing mediating roles when political tensions raise and institutions fail to resolve. However, the heightened politization costed the elders their legitimacy and confidence.

Conclusion

Somaliland achieved indisputable success in realising stability, resisting terrorism and piracy as well as establishing democratic system. To sustain accomplishments, it needs to re-examine its political system and address the challenges posed by the clan-based politics without surrendering to it. The status quo is not sustainable, and unless the politicians recognize the dangers ahead, and mould a way out, the hurdles will persist.

Somaliland's multiparty political system needs to be revisited. Clan politics is not unavoidable. It can be and must be altered. Nevertheless, the road will not be an easy one. Mobilizing the public on ideas requires dedication and strong leadership.

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