

Learning From Within

The End of Somalia's Regional Conflicts



associate editor
KIRAN BHAT

The horn of Africa has been a historically prosperous locale. When Muslim traders penetrated the tribal region that is now Somalia around 1000 C.E., bringing religion, wealth, and infrastructure, they brought what seemed to be the final pieces for the construction of a fruitful society. There are modern advantages as well: 3,000 kilometers of coastline en route from Europe to the growing economies of Asia, largely untapped commodity reserves, and a general lack of involvement in the conflicts of the surrounding region. But despite these advantages, Somalia has long since plunged into hardship. In the past 15 years, Somalia has become synonymous with war, anarchy, and misery. While the situation does not seem to be improving for the nation's almost nine million inhabitants, the current transitional government has a unique opportunity to build on Somalia's traditions and create a stable government for posterity.

Fifteen Years of Chaos

Somalis have been misruled by a series of increasingly incompetent groups since the 1991 ousting of the dictator Mohammed Siad Barre after his two decades in power. First came a loosely allied group of warlords who split the country amongst themselves following Barre's overthrow. But when the rebel alliance failed, Mogadishu became a battleground of warlords and their personal militias. The devastating effects of war in Mogadishu destabilized the nation to the point of anarchy.

While the warlords bickered amongst themselves, another political group began to gain prominence. Following Barre's dismissal, the Muslim nation, which at the time lacked any legitimate government, adopted *Shari'ah* law as

a *de facto* judicial system. In time, Islamic courts became increasingly united and even started offering otherwise non-existent social services. In 2000, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) was formed under the leadership of Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys.

Fearing marginalization, many of the warlords around Mogadishu formed a makeshift allegiance of their own, the ironically named Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT). As the United States supplied arms money to former enemies in the ARPCT to protect against a purported al-Qaeda presence in the ICU, the conflict between the ARPCT and the ICU escalated. Battles between the two groups replaced battles between warlords around late 2005. Gunfights in the capital and outlying towns and villages killed hundreds of Somali fighters and civilians during 2005 and 2006. By early December 2006, the ICU had driven the ARPCT out of the country, had taken Mogadishu, and was shelling Baidoa, the inland seat of the powerless Transitional Federal Government (TFG), Somalia's internationally recognized government-in-exile.

As it assaulted Baidoa, the ICU declared that the entire country would be subject to Islamic law and drew up an impromptu Islamic constitution. All of this worried Somalia's western neighbor Ethiopia, a regional military power which maintained a discrete military presence in Somalia to ensure that the ever-present conflicts did not spill over Somalia's western border. Ethiopia was especially concerned with declarations from the ICU that a *jihad* had been declared on Ethiopians inside and outside of Somalia. When the ICU captured Baidoa, Ethiopia sent troops, tanks, and the air force to augment returning ARPCT and small TFG forces, which then collectively advanced on Mogadishu, sweeping

through southern Somalia. By the end of December, less than a month after gaining control of the country, the ICU had retreated back to a single stronghold, the port town of Kismayo. They abandoned the country entirely in January. As Ethiopian troops patrolled Mogadishu in early January, TFG President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, appointed in 2004 and for many months exiled in Kenya, stepped into his capital city for the first time. Former warlords, who soon realized they could no longer run Mogadishu, came with him.

While the TFG now nominally controls Mogadishu, southern Somalia is still a hotbed of ICU loyalists. The United States even launched air strikes against purported al-Qaeda targets in the region following the TFG takeover. Underneath the veneer of TFG control lies the possibility of another drawn-out war, driven by the marriage of a resurgent ICU to other rebel groups and to Somali patriots who see increased foreign presence in their nation as an insult.

The Other Insurgency

Among the darkest fears of both the United States and Ethiopia is the use of guerilla tactics made popular in Iraq and other battlegrounds of the War on Terrorism. The ICU's support was initially derived largely from religious Somalis, while its prominence originally induced anxiety in less religious citizens. Now, in the face of a common enemy, the Ethiopian forces, regrouped ICU fighters have teamed up with secular rebels loyal to warlords who controlled Mogadishu for almost a decade. Many ICU and rebel fighters have threatened to make Mogadishu unlivable. This threat is very real—while Ethiopian forces have the ability to take ground quickly as they did in December, they do not have the ability to maintain a prolonged presence and police the Somalis. In order to prevent just such an insurgency, the African Union (AU) offered to send 8,000 peacekeepers to Mogadishu. The gesture, while earnest, is simply not enough to change the inertia of events. Still, the AU has not been able to come up with a third of that number, sending only 1,200 Ugandan troops who were as scorned in Mogadishu as the Ethiopians.

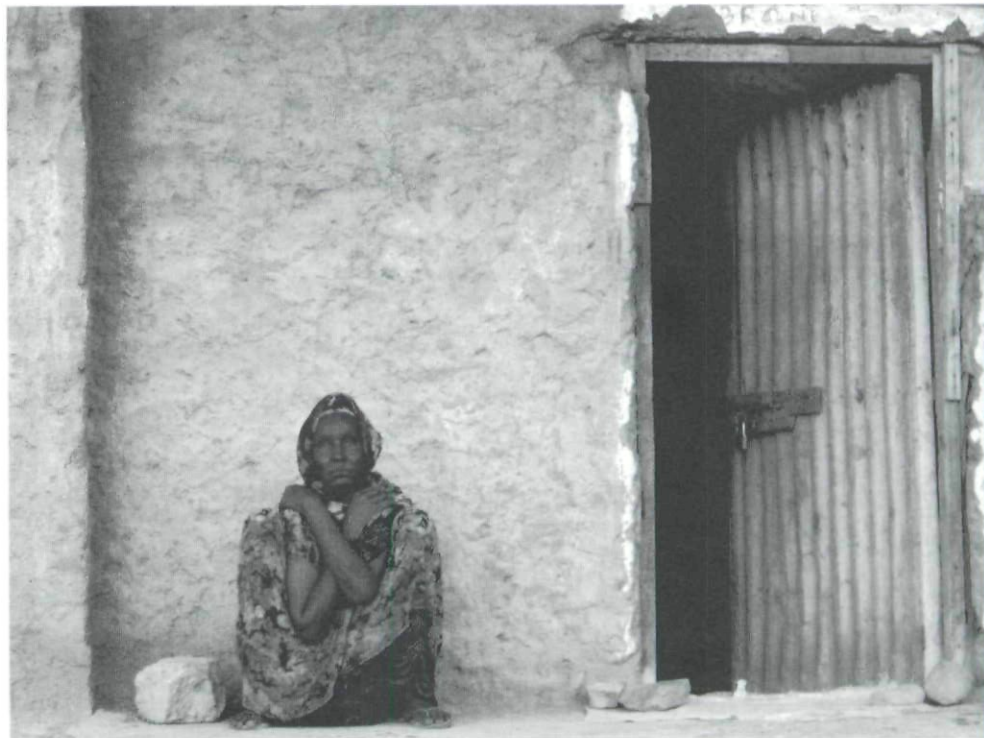
If the ICU and their former rebel enemies unite against Ethiopians and AU troops using guerilla tactics, there are a few potential outcomes. Ethiopia might assume that because the international community has not paid much

attention to the crisis, it can root out insurgents using brutal and indiscriminate tactics. It could also simply send more troops to ensure that the insurgency is beaten back. A worse outcome for Ethiopia would be to retreat from a possible war of attrition that would sap the morale of its people. Most worrying is the chance that such an insurgency could catalyze a regional conflagration that would pull Ethiopia's bitter rival Eritrea into the fold.

Ethiopia's actions in Somalia have already earned Eritrean consternation, because to Eritrea, Ethiopia's actions are viewed as more of a power grab than a legitimate act of self-defense. According to several sources, the Eritrean government has already provided the ICU and other rebels with arms to fight Ethiopian soldiers in proxy. If Eritrea decides to become more militarily involved in the conflict in Somalia, Ethiopia could react in kind. Such brinkmanship could lead to another all-out war between the uncooperative neighbors. A regional conflict would mean the end of hope for a permanent and sovereign Somali government.

Stopping State Failure

Central and southern Somalia are now among the most vulnerable and explosive regions in the world. Fighting parties, each armed and backed by separate neighbors, could very well bring what is left of Mogadishu and surrounding



Opposite: Ugandan peacekeepers for the African Union carry the coffins of four of their colleagues killed in Somalia. **Above:** A Somali woman sits in a refugee camp established for those displaced by the current conflict.

towns to the ground. Regardless of the outcome of the current crisis, it seems that the losers will be Somalis. The years of unending war have forced many Somalis to escape to other countries; for example, in Britain, Somalis are the largest refugee population. While allegiances change, the miseries of war remain the same. Somalia needs a concrete strategy to extricate itself from the clutches of perpetual warfare.

However meager, the AU's attempt to remedy the crisis and fulfill its role as regional peacekeeper by sending troops to Somalia is commendable. Just as it has sent troops to Darfur, the AU mission in Somalia is an important step in helping the organization rise to its true potential as a regional guarantor of security. As an impartial third party, however, the AU is more capable of preventing conflicts by acting as an intermediary during negotiations instead of attempting to

direct negotiation, they were able to work out a system that prevented anarchy when the central government fell in 1991. A group of elders from rival clans formed an overseeing body known as the *guurti*, which acted as a secular judiciary and helped to write a separate constitution for Somaliland. It has since encouraged open democracy while maintaining the peace between its mini-republic's various factions.

Somaliland has established a system of democratic governance today that uniquely blends local tradition and Western-style republican design. The legislature is bicameral, with a Senate composed of tribally-elected elders (the *guurti*) and a lower House of Representatives, elected directly by the people. The people also elect the President and Vice President, and, like in the United States, the judiciary is secular and independent of the other branches. Because the

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prevent an already existing conflict from escalating. Peaceful resolution is better left to secular tribal leaders who understand the intricacies of Somalia's tribal ruling structure.

A Model for Development

The model of this peace strategy lies only a few hundred miles northwest of Mogadishu. The northwestern region of Somalia, called Somaliland, has acted as an autonomous nation since 1991, with its own government, judiciary, army, and police force. Strangely, a region that started out poorer and more unstable than the rest of Somalia in 1991 has grown into a peaceful oasis in a country otherwise destroyed. The reason for Somaliland's renaissance has colonial origins. While southern and central Somalia, including Mogadishu, were Italian colonies prior to independence, Somaliland was under British jurisdiction. As the Italians imported European culture and products to their colony, Mogadishu flourished as a commercial hub. But Italian meddling also led to an erosion of the traditional values and ruling structures of the clans in that region. The British, suffering from colonial fatigue, left Somaliland as barren as they found it. When the Italians and British left, only British Somaliland retained the forms of traditional negotiation that made the transition to independence smooth.

This important distinction led to the stark contrast that exists between today's Mogadishu and the cities of Somaliland. While central Somalia is currently under foreign military occupation, Somaliland is relatively peaceful. For example, bankers and lenders freely walk in public conducting business unarmed without fear of robbery. Because tribal leaders in Somaliland never lost the traditional system of

system of government has not been imposed from the outside and yet still has many of the mechanisms favored in the West, Somaliland's government is ideal for its people.

In 2001, Somaliland declared independence, but it has not been recognized internationally and hence receives almost no foreign aid, while the powerless and thusfar unsuccessful TFG receives hundreds of millions. This is unfortunate—especially given that Somaliland's model has unequivocally succeeded in preventing war. Since 1991, Somaliland has seen peace, increased participation in democratic practice, and coalition governments. Using their collective credibility, the judiciary has settled disputes and helped build a government that has both legitimacy and transparency. Even more impressively, they have almost entirely disarmed the several tribal and rebel fighters that have populated the region since 1991.

Economically, Somaliland is still fragile—like the rest of Somalia. Somaliland is highly dependent on agriculture for well-being. Somalia's 2.6 percent real GDP growth rate, in spite of the lack of basic policing and property rights, is largely driven by agricultural production. Official economic data in Somaliland is hard to come across, due to the country's lack of independent status. However, even though Somaliland is smaller, poorer, and less developed than the rest of the nation, it will grow at a comparable or even better rate due to its relative calm and property security, two inherent necessities for farming or doing business.

Adopting and Adapting the Model

Somaliland's example can be a general roadmap for the rest of the country. The ICU, rebel warlords, and tribal

fighters have all shown the willingness to shift allegiances depending on who gives them the best opportunity to retain power. Hence, a *guurti*-type arrangement in which communal decisions are made by a council of respected elders or a tribally-oriented senate is quite feasible. The ICU might stress the role of religion in decision-making since they were formed as a collective of Muslim judiciaries and have a devout membership; however, the beauty of the *guurti* is that it works on the mutual respect and traditions inherent to Somalis for hundreds of years. And Somaliland's government is not blasphemous: it urges every citizen to read and learn the lessons of the Koran. A larger Somali *guurti* could create a stable, multiparty democracy representing various interests that have long fought out disagreements with guns.

There exists one major obstacle for the emergence of a tribally-based democracy: currently, no incentive exists for the status quo to change. The TFG is experiencing prominence for the first time in its history, Ethiopia is satisfied controlling Mogadishu under the pretext of its own national security, and rebel fighters are bound to make war until they have some stake in governance. Thus, the incentive must be artificially created, and this is where the AU can help. The AU has a fledgling capacity to spark democratic reforms and economic growth in member states by applying collective diplomatic pressure. While the AU has already accepted the TFG into its group, it must provide pressure for the inclusion of opposition groups in government by offering economic and infrastructural aid to the devastated nation, ensuring both Somalia's and the region's stability. Although the TFG preaches reconciliation, it has yet to reach out to the ICU or frustrated tribal leaders. The AU should offer a neutral location as well as economic incentives to the government to hold a conference with tribal elders and ICU leaders to create either political legitimacy or a power-sharing agreement with a Somaliland-style bicameral legislature. Such agreements would help avoid another round of violence in the war-weary nation.

While Somaliland's example provides a great reference point for the rest of Somalia, it is not a panacea. There are certain factors that make Somaliland more governable than Somalia as a whole. The population of Somaliland is much smaller and less tribally diverse than central Somalia. In addition, the tribes in Somaliland have a history of working together in opposition to oppressive leaders: Barre was toppled largely due to collective resistance from fighters in Somaliland. Somaliland's military is well-armed, while a UN arms embargo on Mogadishu has prevented the TFG from retaining even nominal control without Ethiopian assistance. This factor and Somalia's acrimonious tribal history could make forming an effective *guurti* difficult.

Yet for all the reasons a *guurti* may fail in Somalia, the possibility must still be explored. Unless opposing groups are all brought together as equals in a forum, there will be at least one unsatisfied and angry group. War cannot be

avoided without the participation of the ICU. While the United States has urged the TFG to negotiate with rebels who are drifting toward the ICU in order to weaken a potential insurgency, any such action would not prevent the type of guerilla war that has bogged down Iraq's attempts at decent governance for the past four years. Without having to worry about war, the TFG may be able to allocate a budget to social services, roads, and other necessities that the Somali people have lacked since 1991.

Somalia is at a crossroads. If, at the urging of the AU, it reaches out and incorporates the ICU and rebel opposition into a power-sharing agreement, Somalia may yet be destined for the peace and prosperity that seemed so possible when Mogadishu was a trade hub for early Muslim traders. However, if bitter factions continue to quarrel over religion, tribal ownership of lands, and other such cleavages, Somalia may be destined for another 15 years or more of anarchy and chaos. Fortunately, the TFG seems committed to ending violence – even after several assassination attempts on Abdullahi and company, a fragile truce continues to hold and Somalia is as free from gunfire as it has been in the past 15 years. If the TFG takes the right steps and learns from its innovative and democratic brethren to the north, it can achieve a lasting peace. ■



A Somali soldier examines artillery captured from the rebel Islamic Courts Union (ICU) fighters. Many believe that Eritrea helped equip ICU rebels against Ethiopia.

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