

***Becoming Somaliland:
"... one thorn bush at a time ..."***

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"There are two Somalias today. The northern territory of Somaliland is peaceful and is an emerging democracy. The south of Somalia is a rump state, and lacks local legitimacy" (Jhazbhay, 2008, p. 61).

After the Somali civil war succeeded in ousting dictator Siad Barre in 1991 warlords and their militias have turned the south of Somalia into their own personal fiefdoms (Farah, Hussein and Lind, 2002; Terliden, 2004; Woodward, 2004). Since then Somalia has been unable to retain even the most minimal central administration – it is "the failure among failed states" (Menkhaus, 2004, p. 16). Over the years a number of peace and reconciliation efforts have been carried out, with outsiders attempting to build stable state structures top-down, but none of these has taken root (Kaplan, 2008, pp. 146-147).

In contrast, Somaliland has been described as "the inspiring story of resilience and reconstruction and of a truly African Renaissance which has many lessons to teach the rest of Africa, and the international community" (Brickhill and Johnson, 2001 cited in Jhazbhay, 2008, p. 61). While the road has not always been smooth, the Republic of Somaliland, the secessionist northwestern slice of Somalia that declared independence in 1991, has managed to construct a functioning government from the bottom up, on its own, with little outside assistance. Indeed, the incorporation of traditional Somali forms of governance and the utilization of traditional peace building methods helped to create one of the most democratic and stable political system in the entire Horn of Africa, which has not yet been recognized by the international community (Bradbury, Abokor and Yusuf, 2003; Kaplan, 2008; Mangan, 2010; Richards, 2008; Simanowitz, 2005).

This essay will provide an explanation for Somaliland's successful peacebuilding process, focusing especially on the period from 1991 till 2000, before the beginning of the country's

transition to multi-party democracy. Three key determinants for the success are identified: the role of clan elders, the unique hybrid government and international isolation. The essay concludes with lessons that the rest of Africa and the international community can learn from the case of Somaliland.

I. Context

Although the Somali people have a shared ethnicity, culture, language, and religion, they are divided by clan affiliations, the single most important component of their identity (Kaplan, 2008, p. 144). As can be seen in Figure 1, the Somali population is divided into five major clans (plus minorities), each consisting of numerous subclans which join or split in a fluid process.

According to Kaplan (2008, p. 145)

“these ‘clan-states’ typically work through a diffuse and decentralized decision-making process that culminates in a community meeting open to all adult males - a shir [beeheed]- at which major economic, political, and social policies are determined”.

Somaliland has a comparatively homogeneous population, as the majority of its people come from three main clan families - the Isaaq, Dir (Gadabursi and Issa), and Daarood /Harti (Warsangeli and Dolbahante) - of whom the Isaaq are the largest (Bradbury, Abokor and Yusuf, 2003, p. 457). Based on this kinship, a differing colonial history¹ and shared historical experiences the people of Somaliland have developed a sense of identity distinct from the rest of Somalis, an important element of their peacebuilding success (Huliaras, 2002; Kaplan, 2008; Mangan, 2010).

The grievances of Somalilanders, ultimately culminating in the country’s secession, can be traced back to the economic and political marginalization, as well as discrimination they experienced in the united Somali Republic (Huliaras, 2002; Kaplan, 2008; Omaar, 1994). This exclusion of the north further was intensified during the twenty-one years of repressive military reign by Siad Barre. His regime, increasingly dominated by southern clans, concentrated its

¹ British Somaliland was administered with indifference and minimal interference in societal structures, leaving its native political institutions intact, while Italy exerted considerable control over southern Somalia and restructured the social hierarchy, thus disrupting the historic balance of clan ties (Farley, 2010; Huliaras, 2002; Mangan, 2010).

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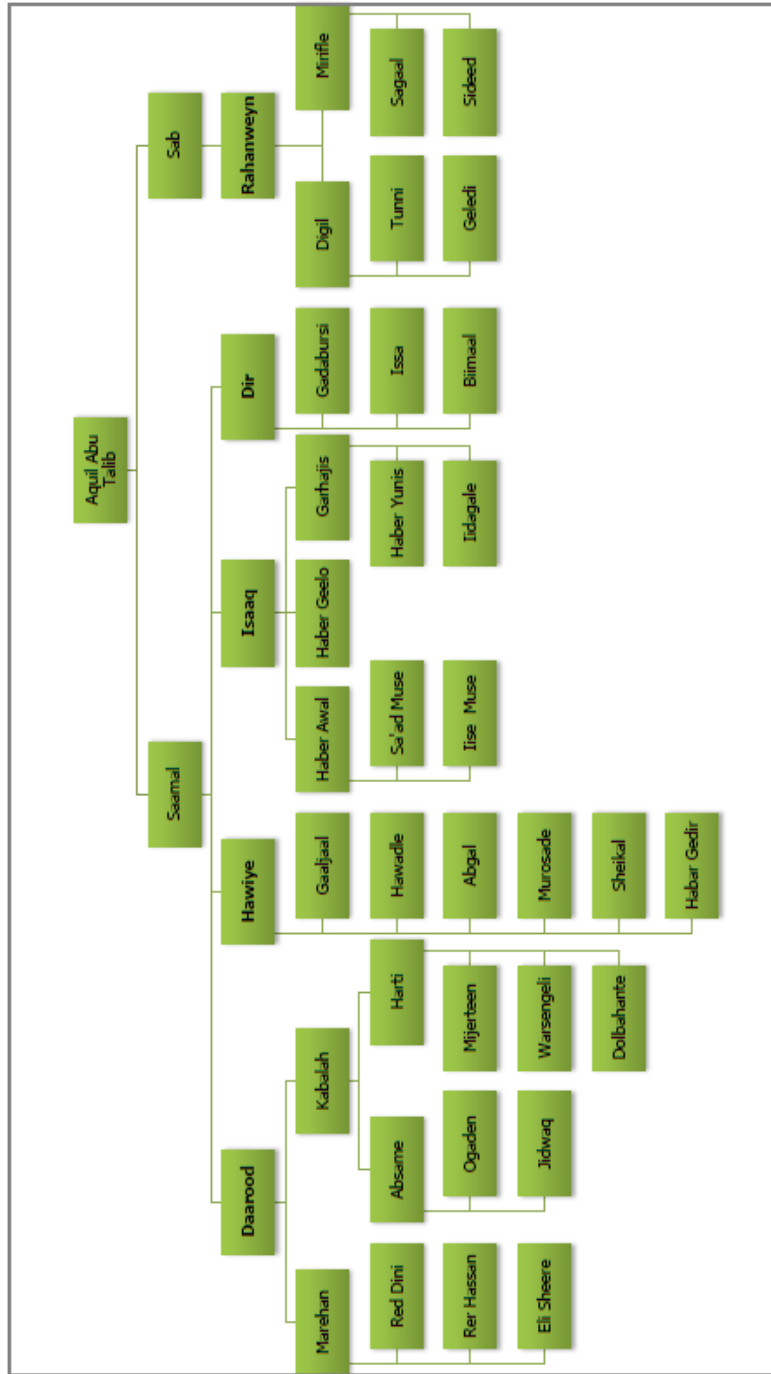
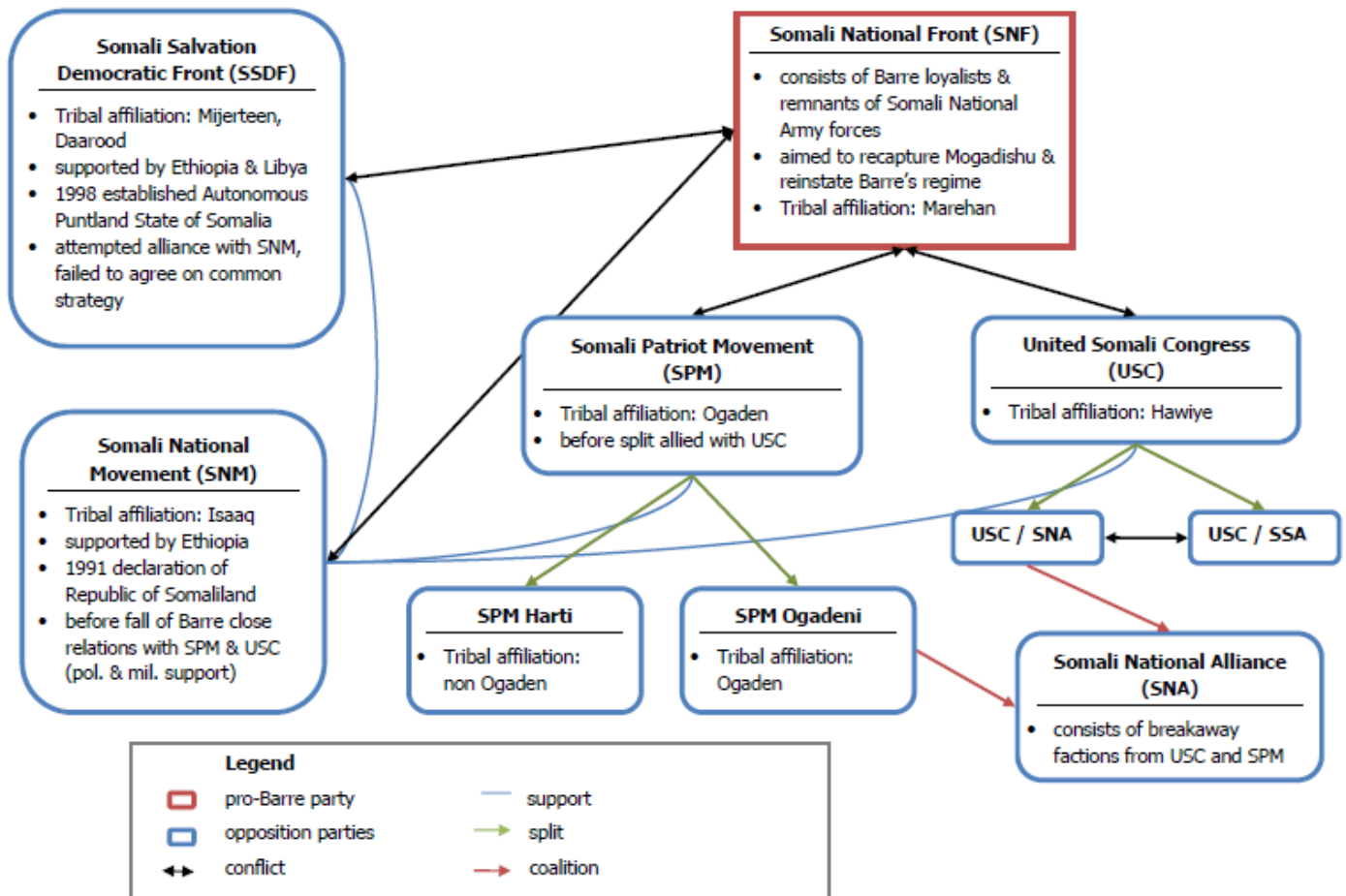


Figure 1 Major Somali Lineages

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Somalis had no mechanisms for registering their increasing discontent, as the military regime used excessive force and collective punishment to suppress any opposition. Attempts to overthrow the military regime only led to increased killings of civilians, mass abuses and destruction. Encouraged by Ethiopia, numerous clan-based resistance movements sprang up across the country (to be seen in Model 1), most notable the Isaaq-affiliated Somali National Movement (SNM). The civil war ended in January 1991 with the ouster of Barre, bringing the beginning of state collapse and failure for the south, but promise for the north (Elmia and Barise, 2006; Kaplan, 2008; Richards, 2008).

Model 1 Local Actors in the Somali Conflict



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II. Peacebuilding Process

On the 18th of May 1991 leaders of the SNM and traditional elders, meeting at the Burao Shir Beeleed, declared the independence of the Republic of Somaliland and thus its withdrawal from the union with the south. Although the SNM's initial *raison d'être* was not to secede from the Somali union, but to overthrow Siad Barre's dictatorship, they had to bow to popular pressure. An interim administration formed from the SNM leadership was established; it was given a mandate to govern for two years and to prepare the country for elections, as well as accommodating non-Isaaq communities into the government. The conference also restored relations between the Isaaq and other northern clans (Bradbury, Abokor and Yusuf, 2003; Hansen, 2006; Hansen and Bradbury, 2007; Jhazbhay, 2008; Richards, 2008).

It failed, however, to heal divisions within the SNM and among the Isaaq that had developed during the war, and which resulted in the outbreak of fighting in Burao between the militias of two Isaaq subclans (Bradbury, Abokor and Yusuf, 2003; Hansen and Bradbury, 2007; Jhazbhay, 2007; Omaar, 1994). In March 1992 this was followed by fighting in Berbera when the government sought to establish control over the port and its revenue, a confrontation that threatened to push Somaliland into civil war. Somaliland's elders stepped in to re-establish peace through clan conferences, the first of which took place October 1992 in the town of Sheikh (Bradbury, Abokor and Yusuf, 2003; Hansen and Bradbury, 2007; Jhazbhay, 2007; Omaar, 1994).

The Sheikh conference was highly important as it "established a framework for the participation of clan elders in Somaliland's post-war system of governance by institutionalising the national council of elders - the *guurti*", the highest political council comprising titled and non-titled clan leaders.

"The *guurti* of Somaliland's different clans were constituted as a national *guurti* and given responsibility for controlling the clan militia, preventing acts of aggression against other communities, and for defending Somaliland" (Bradbury, Abokor and Yusuf, 2003, p. 460).

This so-called *beel* (clan or community) system of governance and its framework for internal security were consolidated in the subsequent Shir Beeleed taking place in Borama from January to May 1993. The national *guurti* oversaw the peaceful transfer of power from the SNM administration to a civilian government headed by Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal (Hansen, 2006; Hansen and Bradbury, 2007; Kaplan, 2008; Richards, 2008). The conference also produced an

interim Peace Charter - based on the traditional law of social conduct between clans - that established the basis for law and order, and a Transitional National Charter that defined the political structures of government (Kaplan, 2008, p. 148).

Yet between November 1994 to October 1996 Somaliland was once again enmeshed in internal conflicts threatening its survival, this time due to political opportunism by politicians and growing dissatisfaction among certain Isaaq clans with the formula for sharing political power adopted at the Borama conference. Thus the second major peace conference, the Hargeysa Shir Beeleed (October 1996 - February 1997), increased the opposition and minority seats in the house of parliament. The elders re-selected Egal as president and adopted an interim constitution, as well as schedule for a transition from the clan system of governance to a democratic, multiparty system (Bradbury, Abokor and Yusuf, 2003; Hansen, 2006; Hansen and Bradbury, 2007; Kaplan, 2008).

In 2002 Somaliland began the democratisation process with its first round of district council elections, widely considered the most peaceful in Africa for twenty years. The successful elections for the President (2003) and the Lower House of Parliament (2005) were an important milestone in the country's transition to a stable multi-party democracy (Richards, 2008; Simanowitz, 2005).

“Although many of its governing structures need work and many of its politicians, bureaucrats, and judges lack experience, Somaliland has already passed a number of democratic milestones that few states in Africa and the Middle East have reached” (Kaplan, 2008, p. 150).

III. Explanation for success

Although not yet recognized by the international community, today Somaliland has many of the attributes of a state, with a constitution, a functional parliament and government ministries, an army, a police force and judiciary (Bradbury, Abokor and Yusuf, 2003, p. 458). It has “managed to establish itself as a model of stability, good governance and economic discipline” (Simanowitz, 2005, pp. 335-336). Militias have been demobilised and incorporated in a national army, mines have been cleared, refugees repatriated, and a new civil service created. The infrastructure has been rebuilt and modern airports, hospitals, ports, power plants and universities established. Commercial activity has revived and there has been a progressive

development of civil society organisations (Bradbury, Abokor and Yusuf, 2003; Kaplan, 2008; Simanowitz, 2005).

This remarkable process of bottom-up state-building was made possible through three elements: the role of clan elders as peacemakers, the unique hybrid government and the country's international isolation.

Clan elders as peacemakers

Clan elders, chosen by virtue of personal attributes such as expertise in the political arts of compromise and persuasion, courage, and a reputation for fairness, hold an immeasurable amount of power and influence in Somali society (Ahmed and Green, 1999; Omaar, 1994; Richards, 2008). Their power stems from the authority their clan has delegated onto them to manage its affairs: to settle disputes within the clan, and to relate with other groups, including declaring war and making peace (Omaar, 1994, p. 234). The highest level council of clan elders is the Guurti, which, convened on an ad hoc basis, is a traditional system of clan governance necessary to resolve difference between the clans or to unite them in times of crisis. Under the SNM the Guurti became a permanent institution, acting as a mediator between the liberation movement/interim administration and the people (Richards, 2008, pp. 12-13). The clan elders' traditional peace-making efforts resolved conflicts, reduced tensions between communities, restored trust and harmonious relations between clans, and increased positive interactions among different groups, thus providing the peaceful and stable environment necessary for the process of government formation and the rebuilding of civil society (Huliaras, 2002; Omaar, 1994; Richards, 2008). The Shir Beeleed played a central role in peace-making; vital not only for reconciliation purposes, but, through large-scale public participation, also in reaching a consensus on the future form of the government (Hansen, 2006; Hansen and Bradbury, 2007; Richards, 2008). During these conferences the clan elders followed their traditional approach to mediation, guided by the Somali proverb: 'If you want to dismantle a hedge, remove one thorn bush at a time'. They focused on developing the trust essential for negotiation which would help sustain the peace process (Omaar, 1994, p. 235).

Hybrid government: the beel system

Instead of having a democratic model of governance imposed on them from outside, Somaliland has managed to fuse Western-style institutions of government with its own

traditional forms of social and political organization (Hansen and Bradbury, 2007; Kaplan, 2008; Richards, 2008; Simanowitz, 2005). This hybrid government consisted of an Executive with a President, Vice President and Council of Ministers, a Legislature, comprising a bicameral parliament with an Upper House of Elders and a House of Representatives, as well as an independent Judiciary (Bradbury, Abokor and Yusuf, 2003, p. 460). With the incorporation of the Guurti into Legislative the stabilizing influence of the elders was formally recognized. They were also given the responsibility for selecting a president and for ensuring state security by managing internal conflicts (Bradbury, Abokor and Yusuf, 2003; Kaplan, 2008; Richards, 2008). A significant feature of the beel system has also been its inclusiveness in terms of clan representation – indeed government essentially became a power-sharing coalition of Somaliland's main clans (Bradbury, Abokor and Yusuf, 2003; Hansen and Bradbury, 2007).

According to Richards (2008, p. 18) “the inclusion of the traditional was vital for the successful implementation of the modern” as it “established a peaceful environment in which a new form of governance could be introduced”. It allowed for the Somali population to identify with the new state structure and to get accustomed to democratic governance, thus helping it to achieve greater cohesion (Kaplan, 2008; Richards, 2008). More crucially, “it has given the Somaliland administration a popular legitimacy that Somalia's previous governments lacked” (Bradbury, Abokor and Yusuf, 2003, p. 475).

International Isolation

The lack of international recognition meant that Somaliland did not qualify for bilateral aid or support from international financial institutions and received only meagre assistance. Thus the peacebuilding process largely been achieved from the assets and resourcefulness of Somalilanders themselves, forcing the country to become more self-reliant than many other African states (Bradbury, Abokor and Yusuf, 2003; Jhazbhay, 2008; Simanowitz, 2005, p. 336). Indeed members of Somaliland’s Diaspora figured significantly in this process as their remittances contributed to the rapid economic recovery. Many of them have also been actively engaged in conflict resolution and developmental projects aimed at alleviating the region’s humanitarian crises (Jhazbhay, 2008; Kaplan, 2008; Simanowitz, 2005).

Whilst Somaliland’s development may have been aided by greater financial resources, political encouragement and technical advice, the country ultimately benefited from this dearth of external involvement, as it allowed the development of a unique indigenous model of modern

African government (Bradbury, Abokor and Yusuf, 2003; Kaplan, 2008; Mangan, 2010). This sheltered bottom-up state-building process “has yielded a system in which the public feels it has a strong stake together with a robust sense of national identity and patriotic pride” . According to Kaplan (2008, p. 149) it has produced an

“unprecedented degree of interconnectedness between the state and society ... in stark contrast to the past when previous regimes received enormous infusions of external assistance without which they could not survive, and as a result became completely divorced from the economic foundations of their own society”.

IV. Lessons learned

Although there is still a distance to travel, Somaliland's accomplishments are impressive (Simanowitz, 2005, p. 339). As Kaplan (2008, p. 144) points out,

“the success of its society-led, bottom-up process of democratization stands in sharp contrast to the repeated failure of international attempts to construct a Western-style state in the rest of Somalia—and calls into question the fundamental assumptions underlying the top-down, unitary state-building exercises so commonly attempted in fragile states”.

Instead of squeezeing societies into inappropriate Western one-fits-all models of what a modern state is supposed to look like, the international community should focus on adapting and supporting traditional forms of governance that reflect the history, complexity, and particularity of societies (Kaplan, 2008, pp. 154-156). Traditional governance, however, is often associated with primitiveness and backwardness and the inclusion of traditional authority is regarded as a deviation from the normative ‘acceptable.’ Indeed, a report published by the World Bank in 2005 made the argument that stability would never be maintained in Somaliland as long as traditional authority was included in the government (Richards, 2008, pp. 16-17). In this sense international programs concentrate their assistance on easily quantifiable targets for financial aid or reconstruction that promote the importation of generic, centralized state models, thus undermining local capacities and institutions. So in place of propping up the state from outside international assistance efforts are more likely to succeed if they bolster local peacebuilding processes (Kaplan, 2008, p. 155). The Somaliland case has also demonstrated the importance of legitimacy and cohesion for peacebuilding successes. The international community needs to foster governing bodies and systems that will best promote cohesiveness, instead of insisting on

political models that are clearly unable to advance cohesion—or that even undermine it (*Ibid.*, p. 156).

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