Somalia: Thirty Years After

Ibrahim Farah¹

Published online: 16 April 2021
© Society for International Development 2021

Abstract

Politically, Somalia is more or less the same as it was in the late 1990s—rightly put, the *Arta* peace process—with ‘political’ groups competing for power and wealth but with a different approach. The issues on the ‘Somali’ agenda are many, the need to rethink governance immense and ongoing efforts to rebuild the nation, from security to the constitution to the reconciliation process are but national priorities. This article aims to provide a brief assessment of Somalia—30 years after. It will discuss some of the issues in the Somali agenda with emphasis on the story of the *haan* and provide a number of recommendations.

Keywords Elections · ‘Somali’ agenda · Governance

Politically, Somalia is more or less the same as it was in the late 1990s. The *Arta* peace process in Djibouti in 1999/2000, which came after a decade of lawlessness and anarchy, brought together Somali delegates under Djiboutian invitation leading to the formation of the first Transitional National Government (TNG). Various ‘political’ groups are competing for power and wealth; the difference this time being the approach—one or two foreign ‘donors’ versus any ‘donor’ will do kind of scenario. Of course, 2021 is an election year.

After four years plus in office, the Somali government is still grappling with (in)security; *al-Shabaab* is yet to diminish for good; ‘*Somaliland*’ is nowhere either; regional administrations are on a fifty-fifty game plan; the urge and push for decentralization—under a unitary state system of governance—is overly misused; and much of the country is shaken with the effects of ongoing terrorist versus counter-terrorist policies and operations and other related crime-infested issues. What is worse is the politics of aid and its interplay, the absence of a comprehensive post-conflict reconstruction (PCR) plan or even an elders’ advisory council of Somali statesmen.

Ten years ago, issues on the table included semi-warlordism, war economy, organized crime, piracy—and anti-piracy off the Somali coast—and the struggle to end transitional

arrangements; with more fear that Somalia was once again going back to square one. The situation is now slightly different and with more on the national agenda: security, genuine conciliation and the constitution. But, even so, after ten years, all eyes are on the ‘elections’. For example, nobody is talking about the transitional plan and the workability of an exit strategy for the AU mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Few people would be interested to talk about ongoing, but *projectized*, work on the ‘provisional’ constitution or other equally important, national issues; or even about strategic PCR projects like job creation through infrastructure development, free quality education, and the reformation of strong, honest state institutions. In a nutshell, there is a kind of a lull at all levels of progress and development. Is it *fatigue*? Somebody’s plan as work in progress? Or is this a new way of doing business, at least by the incumbents?

For many, politics is about the four-yearly ‘indirect’ elections. For others, it is the kind of organization—in which they seem themselves reflected—they envision as their vehicle for (re)election. The more moderate, however, see political actors all as ‘a group, a kind of elitist clique, recycling around; there is nothing else, and nobody else’. But, we all know that politics is about the art of government: it is about public affairs, it is based on compromise and consensus, especially in a post-conflict country like Somalia, and it is

✉ Ibrahim Farah
farahiq2002@yahoo.com

¹ Justice and Peace Network (Maandeeq—JPN), Mogadishu, Somalia

about power, which is itself defined as decision-making, agenda-setting, as well as thought control.¹

Whatever the definition of politics, or even Somali politics, which is basically clan politics, there are a number of issues on the Somali agenda. There is also a need to rethink governance in today's Somalia; from ongoing efforts to reform the security sector, to the constitutional review process, to the reconciliation process which is what Somalia needs most. This article aims to provide an overview on current developments and do a brief assessment on Somalia—30 years after. It will identify issues in the Somali agenda and deliberate a bit more on some of the national issues we have on the table—with emphasis on the story of the *haan*²—and then provide a number of recommendations as the way forward.

Brief Assessment of the Past Three Decades

What is different now than the past three decades? While it is difficult to provide a brief answer to such a complex question, some considerations could still be made.

First, the Somali government is still protected by the AU-mandated mission in Mogadishu, the capital. Second, despite the relative *fatigue* of the public over the uncertainties and other issues surrounding 'elections', there is still a degree of popular support for the exercise, if not necessarily a critical mass. Third, although it is still a work in progress, we may go into 'elections' after some critical technical delays. Fourth, although on the fence as to the value of the exercise, there is a vibrant civil society that is more than ready to provide advice and at the same time political pressure if and where necessary. Fifth, although divided along clan-based political alliances and regionalism, more than ever—this time—'the Somali conscience', mainly that of the youth which make up 75% of the population,³ is awake, alive and kicking. Sixth, with ongoing political bluffs aside

and the possibility of peaceful, 'indirect' elections, the new government has had a better platform from which to operate; with slightly better knowledge of what *statecraft* is all about; and this will help to build some kind of policy continuity and institutional memory. Finally, probably the new government will have plenty on its plate including the need to develop a post-conflict reconstruction and development package, which answers the critical questions posed in the building of a *Marshall* plan,⁴ comprehensive enough to get Somalia back to its feet. The COVID-19 pandemic has also had its effects but not as major. And, while the government did not use it as a political leverage to postpone elections, for example, the pandemic did take some of the government's focus and attention away from equally important national issues.

With all of the above, nonetheless positive issues in mind, there is more than enough reason to have hope for the country, and to consider new directions. For example, given the fact that the 'federalism' project failed—by all practical measures—Somalia and its people, it is time to go for a decentralized unitary state system as the best governance model;⁵ hence devolving power and the decentralization of services down to the village level. It is also time for the Somali youth to stand up for the country and reject to be used for clan-, region- or group-based partisan politics. Briefly assessed, for many of the Somali youth, policies to enable quality education and opportunities for entrepreneurship top their list of priorities, as opposed to political bickering as a substitute for governance. This is a signal that, come next 'elections', we may be in for a shock from the generation coming of age; and a major shift in Somali political history. But even with any kind of genuinity, as shall be seen from the following story, there is still need for genuine conciliation in today's Somalia.

¹ For a very useful collection of essays examining different concepts of politics as well as contrasting views of the discipline (Leftwich 2004).

² Ministry of Interior, Federal Affairs and Reconciliation, *National Reconciliation Framework—True Reconciliation: Repairing our broken Haan*, Version 8: 7 March 2019.

³ Not only in the Somalia front, but UN Secretary-General also António Guterres has made empowering youth a priority for the world body, especially with many of the world's 1.2 billion young people affected by the hardship of war, and has flagged the key role that they play as agents of change and critical actors in preventing conflict and building peace. In 2015, for example, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution that recognized the 'positive contribution of youth' in the promotion of peace and security and supported efforts aimed at advancing their development. For more on this, see 'Security Council resolution 2250' adopted in 2015.

⁴ The US-led *Marshall Plan* for post-war Europe was almost exclusively a package of concessional loans, and conceivably viable only in a context such as that of Western Europe, which had some pre-war memory of institutions that met a broad consensus, and an industrial base that could be reconstituted through reconstruction. Its use here is but an emphasis on the importance of an acceptable PCR and in a Somalia context. In his speech, however, George Marshall emphasised a number of key questions including: What are the reactions of the people? What are the justifications of those reactions? What are the sufferings? What is needed? What can best be done? What must be done? For more on this, and the whole concept of the US-led, post-World War II recovery programme for Europe, see *Marshall Plan* speech by George Marshall, Content available under the GNU Free Documentation License.

⁵ For example, the EC's commissioned LSE study and its recommendations, Lewis and Mayall (1995).

Issues in the Somali Agenda

Since the Arta peace process, each and every Somali government, transitional or not, has been grappling with peace building and state building. Within this framework, there are three key issues in the national agenda: security, the constitution and genuine conciliation under which all the issues in the Republic can be discussed in a Somali way. For example, (1) *Somaliland*'s push for secession; (2) Puntland's more powerful regionalist tendencies and the problem with federalism in general; (3) *al-Shabaab* and all other terrorist and counter-terrorist measures⁶ that cannot get along with *Sharia* and the Somali *Xeer*—Somali customary law; (4) general insecurity related to the overall absence of effective state institutions and their effects on Mogadishu and its environs; (5) the projectization of the constitutional-making and/or review process; (6) security/defense sector reform; and (7) the possibility of one-person versus one-vote elections; not necessarily in the immediate future.

While the AU mission has dominated the security sector and the term security sector has become anonymous to AMISOM and the international community, as of to-date, there is no clear exit strategy for the AU mission or any tangible transitional plan by the government, reconciliation tops the national agenda. With counter-terrorism measures all over the country, civilian casualties are nobody's responsibility. From the European Union Training Missions (EUTM) to AMISOM, to individual troop-contributing countries, to other friendly countries like Turkey, everybody is training troops for Somalia. Some argue that troops, other than those by the Turks, are not qualified enough to take on security threats at national level; from differences on doctrine and strategy, to competing and contradicting national interests, to non-alignment of Somali versus non-Somali strategic security objectives.⁷

Reconciliation—or rightly put these days 'genuine conciliation'—and the constitution in general have been projects of this UN agency or that international non-governmental organization (NGO); sometimes in the form of projects or even sub-contracts to local, national NGOs. Sponsors have been non-Somali and so were the items on the agenda.

⁶ Some of the interviewees raised concern over high civilian casualties arising from counter-terrorism measures in Somalia; hence calls for a balanced engagement between development and security issues as part and parcel of ongoing peace-building and state-building efforts. Other equally important issues are the projectization of the constitutional-making and/or review process—which is always donor-funded and under a UN programme rather than being more independent, Somali-led, Somali-owned process—and the electoral process which focuses more on the same old 'indirect elections' as opposed to the targeted 'one-person vs. one-vote' elections. Notes from the field, Muqdisho: 13 October 2020.

⁷ Notes from the field, Muqdisho: 13 October 2020.

In 3 decades, other than successful attempts in Boorame, 'Somaliland' and Garoowe, 'Puntland' which both led to the formation of their current administrations, there has been no national level, genuine conciliation in Somalia. Every time, there is a push for dealing more with the secondary sources of the Somali conflict than the real issues; the root causes. In other words, more push and interest in the constitutional and institutional aspects of the Somali conflict as opposed to its psychological and perceptual aspects; hence all kinds of agreements that cannot be implemented on the ground. In the final analysis, no genuine conciliation has ever taken place (Farah 2013).

The Story of the *Haan*⁸

There is a Somali proverb which says, 'weaving a *Haan* (milk container) should start from the bottom'. When weaving the *Haan* the nucleus is formed and it is woven upward up until it is completed. The process of making *haan* is long and tedious. In Somalia, women with careful consideration weave the traditional *Haan*. It is very important not only for the livelihood but also for culture and heritage. It carries water and stores milk. It is also the transport to the market. In the Somali folktale, the parts of the *Haan* conversed with one other. The main container (*Haan*) says: 'I swear, if it wasn't for me, the family wouldn't be drinking milk'. The lid (*haruub*) says: 'If I wasn't covering you, you wouldn't be able to bring milk to the family'. The sealer (*ningax*) says: 'If I wasn't sealing you, you wouldn't bring anything to the family'. The belt holding the lid (*higaag*) jumps in and says: 'If I wasn't holding you together, you wouldn't bring milk to the family'. The frame (*saab*) says: 'If all of you weren't inside me, you would have all fallen apart, and wouldn't bring anything to the family'. The ring (*gedaan*) says: 'Hey *Saab*, if I wasn't circling you, you would have fallen apart, and you wouldn't hold anything, right?' Finally, the leather binding the robe (*jil*) holding the *saab* and the *gedaan* tight says: 'Hey *Saab* and *Gedaan*, if I wasn't tying the two of you together, you wouldn't hold anything'.

Similarly, and in a spirit of unity of purpose, when the mother puts the milk into the *haan*, she and her eldest daughter shake it for long so that it produces butter. In this process, the milk goes to the lid (*haruub*) and then back to the container (*haan*) in a rigorous back and forth process with

⁸ Ministry of Interior, Federal Affairs and Reconciliation, *National Reconciliation Framework—True Reconciliation: Repairing our broken Haan*, Version 8: 7 March 2019. The author would like to thank Suldán Abdisalam Suldán Haji Mohamud Suldán Ahmed and Jama Egal for the initiation and introduction of the story of the *Haan* into the Somali genuine conciliation literature; a major scholarly and policy contribution.

the *Haruub* saying to the *Haan*: it is better with you, and the *Haan* sends it back to the *haruub* and says: To you, you deserve more. So, the butter is made through this genuine conciliatory and cooperative process of ‘to you, you deserve more; no, no to you, you deserve more’ with the moral of the story being that if the *Haan* and all its parts are not linked together, the family shall have no milk, let alone butter.

This is, but emphasis on, a clear message that among all key issues in the national agenda, genuine conciliation tops the list. With genuine conciliation, many believe that objective strategies and other national priorities are easier to achieve.⁹ And, with Somali folklore and the tradition of story-telling and analogy-building, it tells a story of its own; this time, a political one which is also a call to rethink Somali governance.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Thirty years on, Somalia is still grappling with peace building and state building efforts with some extent of technical support by the international community. There is, however, a debate as to whether the national agenda is Somali enough. It is also high time to rethink governance in Somalia. This means that rather than work under political pressure by members of the international community it is good to be independent and work along the lines of Somali national interest and values. It also means that there is a need to start with the ideals of governance, in other words basic public management and administration, as opposed to good governance or effective governance or even ‘democratic’ governance; if such exists.

Along the same lines, this means that the next government will have to develop a comprehensive PCR model for the country; put together an elders’ council to advise on governance; and most important of all identify and work on key national priorities as opposed to the political bickering of the past. It also means that Somalia is at crossroads and that, with good leadership and rethought governance, the Somali people can make it this time.

Based on the above background and assessment, which derives from a 3-month, targeted pre-election research exercise, and in the form of a reflection, on where public opinion stands on these issues, there are a number of observations-turned recommendations one can make:

1. External efforts to reconstruct the Somali state like the ‘federalist’ project, have proven counterproductive, as they reinforce what divides Somalis rather than what

has historically united them.¹⁰ As Somalis, we need to explore developing and maintaining an unyielding focus on good governance, in a rethinking model and based on a national vision centered on a service delivery orientation; while pursuing our geopolitical ambitions in the region and further afield. As part of this, there must be a national dialogue over the importance and the need to jointly cultivate a decentralized unitary state system;

2. Since the *Arta* peace process, and with the era of transitional arrangements gone as from late 2012, various Somali governments have been contributing immensely to ongoing peace building and state-formation processes. Incrementally, this needs to continue. There is also the need for an elders’ assembly to help steer effective governance as well as a PCR model for Somalia (Farah and Handa 2015);
3. Many believe we have come this far and we cannot, therefore, afford to lose ground once again. This means there is a call for Somalia’s political actors, and more importantly the youth, to play a major role in providing national leadership by waking up to the challenges of the existing decades-long leadership crisis;
4. With ‘elections’ round the corner, Somalia must in no way be a country pervaded with regime paranoia and/or directionless opposition; as the two—coupled with the absence of a constitutional court and an independent national human rights institution—can lead to extreme domestic repression and other human security-related pressures, man-made poverty of all kinds and, worst of all, isolationism. This will only emphasize the fact that future strategic partnerships and the not only necessary, but required leverage on partners are both important for today’s Somalia; and, finally,
5. There is a call for pre-election, policy-oriented academic debates and discourse—including live presidential candidate TV debates—as they shall open up to more in-depth conversations and dialogue that can offer insights, help cement the fragile Somali political system, and create space for all.

In conclusions, recent developments in Somalia, with the technically-delayed elections still not visibly on the table, the administration in Hargeysa still not being part of the process, and the Punt region and others pushing for the full implementation of the clan-based ‘federalist’ agenda, it is high time for Somalia’s visionary leaders, particularly the youth, to stand up for the nation. It is time to wake up, call for an inclusive process, and have the country move onto the Somalia we all want; one that is peaceful with itself and

⁹ Notes from the field, Muqdisho: 13 October 2020.

¹⁰ One of the major opponents of federalism was Somalia’s former Prime Minister: 1964–1969 (Hussein 2008).

that can, at the same time, reclaim its traditionally, sacred position in the international community of nations. Somalia, 30 years after, is, unfortunately, again at cross-roads; but it can go over the hump. As a result, it is within the premises if rethinking 'governance' that gives the much-needed currency. And, in the case of Somalia, it is not only free and fair, but also peaceful, elections that matter most as the rest will come at their pace where genuine post-conflict reconstruction and development shall, insha Allah, begin.

References

- Farah, Ibrahim. 2013. Somalia: No more Missed Opportunities-Realities and Responses. *New Routes* 2: 3–6.
- Farah, Ibrahim, and Susan Handa. 2015. Exploring Post-conflict Reconstruction in Somalia: Pulling apart or pulling together? *Development* 58 (1): 112–116.
- Hussein, Abdirazak Haji. 2008. The Future Constitutional Structure of the Somali Republic: Federal or Decentralized Unitary State? *Hiiraan Online*. https://www.hiiraan.com/op2/2011/apr/the_future_constitutional_structure_of_the_somali_republic_federal_or_decentralized_unitary_state.aspx. Accessed 13 October 2020.
- Leftwich, Adrian (ed.) 2004. *What is Politics? The Activity and Its Study*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Lewis, Jaon M., and James Mayall. 1995. *A Study of Decentralized Political Structures for Somalia: A Menu of Options*, European Union.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.