

Political representation in Somalia

citizenship, clanism and territoriality

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Representation is a complex issue in Somali society, which has been devastated by several decades of civil war causing distrust between people and disillusion with the 'state'.

More than a million Somalis live outside Somalia, either in refugee camps or in the diaspora, near and far. The war has also led to social fragmentation along lines that previously have been either suppressed or not recognized, and so in addition to issues of lineage and territory, Somalis define their status in terms of 'race', minority, political and religious orientation, generation and gender.

Over the last two decades political representation and participation in externally-supported peace talks in Somalia has been based on a mixture of clan, military and financial power. This has often strengthened the prestige of warlords and political elites from the diaspora. Such actors often lack interest in peace or broad based legitimacy in Somalia in the long term.

The engagement of traditional authorities in externally-sponsored peace negotiations at the national level, designed to imbue these talks and their results with popular legitimacy, has backfired. It has interfered with the flexibility inherent in relations of traditional authority. By siding with one or other party, international involvement has diminished the legitimacy of elders and clan-leaders in the eyes of their local constituencies.

Inclusiveness is a persistent problem. Although women's and minority groups' formal participation in politics has increased in recent peace processes, recognition of their influence and

capabilities has changed little and they are still largely regarded as marginal political actors, both by Somalis and internationally.

Belonging and citizenship

Before the outbreak of the civil war in the late 1980s Somalis were commonly perceived as a homogenous 'nation'. Building a perception of cultural integrity served the interests of nationalist and post-colonial elites who were striving to overcome centrifugal forces of clanism.

The military regime of Siyad Barre took this further by elevating loyalty to the state above the clan. Yet behind the nationalist facade clientism and nepotism continued. In their struggle for power successive Somali governments as well as factions in the civil war have used notions of clan loyalty to mobilize support and to foment divisions among their adversaries.

In the Somali Republic of 1960-91 citizenship was primarily based on patrilineal descent. Article 1 of the Somali citizenship law of 1962 grants citizenship to any person whose father is Somali. Somalis who live abroad and renounce any other citizenship are also included, with a Somali defined as any person who by origin, language and tradition belongs to the Somali nation (article 3).

Somali citizenship broadly derives from the concept of *u dhashay* (born to a family/group/clan/nation). This ancestral understanding of citizenship stresses the blood relationship of all Somalis, who claim descent from a common forefather (*Hii*). At the sub-national level, different Somali communities – pastoral nomadic, agro-nomadic or urban – have different perceptions of belonging relative to their respective needs.

The descent model of citizenship exists in its purest form among pastoral nomadic clans. It allows for flexible alliances, but also for divisions and individual freedom. This suits pastoral nomads who have to act quickly and often individually in pursuit of pasture and water for their herds. For raiding or in defence, groups of relatives unite.

Among agro-pastoralists in southern and central Somalia territoriality is more important. They depend on land and cooperation for survival. A notion of *ku dhashay* (born in a land or a place) is significant here. Strangers are easily adopted. Descent is referred to only for defining social identity at the highest level and strengthening collective security.

In contrast urban communities are characterized by the confederation of different lineages integrated in a centralized political structure based on a complex system of domination, alliance formation and resource exploitation. Religious authorities and leaders have a strong influence. In both the agro-pastoral and the urban models, hierarchy and locality are comparatively more important than in the more 'egalitarian' pastoral nomadic model.

In the Somaliland Citizenship Law of 2002, patrilineal descent was reaffirmed as the basis of citizenship. At the same time clan 'cleansing' during the civil war and massive urbanization since 1991 has strengthened notions of territoriality and 'belonging to a place' throughout the region. Many members of the diaspora have developed a transnational understanding of belonging, and are simultaneously engaged in their country of residence and the homeland.

'Getting used' to a new environment is described by the Somali term *ku dhaqmay*. In the past, this represented a nationalist viewpoint, when particularly under Siyad Barre's regime members of the administration and the security forces were rotated throughout the country. Today it captures the internal and international migration experiences of many Somalis.

Complexities of representation

The internationally-sponsored national reconciliation conferences in Arta, Djibouti (2000), and Mbagathi, Kenya (2002-04), illustrate the complexities and challenges of organizing representation in Somali peace talks.

The Arta conference was conceived as different to previous processes. Warlords were largely excluded from the talks, which were said to be 'owned' by civil society. Religious groups, particularly the 'moderate' Al Islah movement, exercised great influence. No official representatives of Somaliland and Puntland attended the meeting because both administrations

demanded recognition as territorial entities before agreeing to participate.

Importantly a mechanism was agreed for allocating parliamentary seats proportionately by clan – the '4.5 formula'. In the 245-seat parliament, 49 seats were assigned to each of the four biggest clan-families (Dir, Darood, Hawiye and Rahanweyn). Some 29 seats were allocated to 'minority groups' (which is roughly half of the number of seats assigned to the majority clan-families, ie '.5'), with 25 seats (about ten per cent) reserved for women. The share of women's seats includes five from the minority groups, thus the total number of seats adds up to 245.

The conference produced the Transitional National Government (TNG). However, the TNG only enjoyed limited legitimacy in Somalia. Besides being rejected by the warlords, who immediately mobilized resistance against it, and by Somaliland and Puntland, the fact that the TNG largely comprised elites from the diaspora and former employees of Siyad Barre reduced its credibility inside Somalia.

As the TNG foundered a renewed attempt to establish a representative and effective transitional government was undertaken in Kenya. This time the warlords were invited as main actors, following the logic that those who control the violence have to be brought on board in order to achieve peace.

The Eldorat meeting agreed on a federal structure of government: the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). But in the absence of existing federal entities in Somalia, the 4.5 formula was again used to allocate seats for MPs and cabinet ministers. The parliament comprised now of 275 seats, 33 (12 per cent) of which were assigned to women.

In October 2004 the former Puntland leader Abdullahi Yusuf was elected President of the new TFG. The legitimacy of his selection was questionable, however. It was the job of MPs to elect the president. But although traditional authorities were officially meant to be involved in the nominating MPs, this process was hijacked by the faction leaders.

Both Somaliland and influential Islamist groups in Mogadishu rejected the TFG. The new government was also fragmented along clan and other lines and was soon confronted by the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). The ICU defeated a US-backed warlord alliance in Mogadishu in the first half of 2006. It then made quick progress, establishing control over much of southern and central Somalia and challenging the TFG sitting in the town of Baidoa. The success of the Islamist forces reflected



Inaugural session of the Somaliland parliament 1993 © Hamish Wilson

the lack of legitimacy and political power of the TFG, which ultimately only survived following massive Ethiopian military intervention in December 2006.

The ICU has been the only authority that has enjoyed even a reasonable amount of local legitimacy in southern Somalia since 1991. However it was perceived as a threat by most neighbouring countries and by the West. Its removal by Ethiopian military forces dramatically illustrated the gap between internal and external conceptions of representation and peacebuilding in Somalia and marked the beginning of two years of violence in which clan and Islamist militias fought the TFG and its Ethiopian ally.

The increasing influence of political Islam (particularly *Wahhabism* and *Salafism*) has added another dimension to the complex dynamics of representation in Somalia. For Islamists, patrilineal descent is subordinate to belonging to the community of Muslims (*Ummah*). Islamism also impacts on the issue of gender. Women were officially integrated at the conferences in Djibouti and Kenya, although in the end they did not receive all the seats allocated to them officially. But there are fears that an Islamist government might exclude women from politics altogether.

Multiple affiliations: the Dhulbahante clan in the Sool region

The situation in Sool region in northern Somalia demonstrates competing Somali models of belonging, based variously on lineage, territoriality and religious orientation.

Sool region is predominantly inhabited by members of the Dhulbahante clan, part of the Harti clan federation, itself a subset of the larger Darood clan-family. Together with the Isaaq, Warsengeli and Gadabursi clans, the Dhulbahante were part of the British Protectorate of Somaliland in northwestern Somalia until 1960.

The Isaaq are the majority population in the northwest. Historically many Isaaq were allied to the British protectorate, while most Dhulbahante supported the anti-colonial Dervish uprising between 1899 and 1920. During the civil war between the government of Siyad Barre (1969-91) and the Somali National Movement (SNM), the Dhulbahante and the Isaaq stood on opposite sides. While the SNM was predominantly an Isaaq movement, the Dhulbahante generally supported the government.

The SNM took over most of northwestern Somalia in early 1991 and proposed peace negotiations to all other clans in the region. To avoid further fighting Dhulbahante representatives

– comprising traditional authorities together with some intellectuals, military figures and politicians – acceded to the majority Isaaq wish to secede from a collapsing Somalia.

By territory the Dhulbahante became part of Somaliland, which claims the borders of the former British Protectorate. Since then a small number of Dhulbahante have cooperated with the Somaliland government, either in the capital city of Hargeisa or in the Sool region. However the majority of the clan never agreed to secession and over the years many Dhulbahante have felt marginalized by Hargeisa and have distanced themselves politically from Somaliland.

Dhulbahante dissenters found a new political home in the Puntland State of Somalia, which was established in the northeast of the country in 1998. Founded as ‘Harti-state’, Puntland brought together all clans descending from Harti (ie Majeerteen, Dhulbahante, Warsangeeli) and a few other Darood clans in the region. Many members of the Dhulbahante actively supported the presidency of Abdullahi Yusuf, the first president of Puntland (1998-2004) and for this were allocated the position of the vice president in the Puntland polity.

The government of Puntland, based in Garowe, aims to re-build a strong and united Somalia within the 1990 state borders. It does not recognize the independence of Somaliland and actively undermines its regional neighbour’s territorial ambitions, claiming Sool and other Harti-inhabited regions of Somaliland. Between 2002 and 2007 Somaliland and Puntland forces clashed several times in the contested boundary areas, although these skirmishes were short lived.

By manoeuvring between Somaliland and Puntland, many Dhulbahante elites, such as traditional authorities and political and military leaders, have lost credibility in the eyes of their own people. The traditional authorities of the clan especially are increasingly perceived as ‘politicians’, a derogatory reference implying that they follow their own self-interests rather than doing what is best for the community.

Everyday life for local people in the Sool borderlands involves a struggle for survival, torn by conflicting affiliations with neighbouring political centres in Hargeisa and Garowe. Members of these borderland communities hold administrative and military office in Somaliland and Puntland. In certain places in Sool region there are two administrations with two police and two military forces, staffed with Dhulbahante and salaried either by Hargeisa or Garowe. Additionally, Dhulbahante managed to get high ranking positions in the TNG, and later in the TFG. In the early 1990s they were also prominently represented in the militant religious movement

Al Itihad Al Islamiya that fought for the establishment of an Islamic state in Somalia.

Having multiple affiliations has brought some costs for the Dhulbahante. While they play delicate political roles in Somaliland and Puntland, they are also marginalized by both administrations. They are perceived as strategic allies, but hardly ever fully embraced. Also, Sool region does not attract many resources from the political centres and due to the ongoing conflict between Somaliland and Puntland, it is seen as unstable by the international community. Almost no international aid reaches the region, despite its enormous needs.

Representation and accountability

Representation in Somalia is characterized by multiple affiliations, shifting alliances and transferable identities based on nation, clan and religion. Somali representatives in peace processes commonly wear several ‘hats’, transferring affiliation as appropriate to whichever role suits their personal interests or those of their patrons. Efforts to reduce this complexity to simplistic blueprints such as the 4.5 formula or standardized concepts of federalism have so far proved ineffective.

The cases of Somaliland and Puntland suggest that building a representative government can begin by bringing together clan delegates, guerrilla commanders, intellectuals and women’s groups. And the increasingly influential religious leaders should be added to this list. Generally, representation can only be effective if it is bound tightly to the local context, and if representatives of groups are genuinely accountable to their constituencies at home, to face queries and possibly even sanctions.

Somali ‘national’ peacemaking processes, such as the conferences in Arta and Mbagathi, have not been able to match the level of representation reached in processes in either Puntland or Somaliland. Many delegates at national reconciliation conferences are from the diaspora, who fly in to meetings held outside of Somalia, frequently get ‘per diems’ from international donors, and can simply return abroad if things do not ‘work out’ back home.

Representativeness cannot be created from outside. It has to come from within and to be accountable to those who supposedly are being represented: ordinary Somalis.

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