

A conversation with Sultan Said Garasse

Sultan Said is a respected and influential traditional titled elder from Garowe town, Nugal region in Puntland. He has participated in numerous peace processes in northeast Somalia, including those that resulted in the formation of the Puntland State of Somalia in 1998



What is the role of an elder?

Being an elder is a Somali tradition established long ago, when there was no government and people needed to maintain some form of order based on decision-sharing.

Even if a modern government springs up, the traditional system of governance continues to survive because the government cannot be everywhere. We know that the majority of Somalis live in rural areas. Urban settlers depend on the rural economy since the country has neither industry nor profitable agricultural production, except along the two rivers in the south.

Life therefore depends on livestock rearing. A typical rural community may be 300 kilometres from the town. Such a community needs leadership and decision makers who keep order. The idea behind traditional leadership is now, as it was in the past, to serve such communities.

What has been your role in peace processes? What conflicts have you been involved in resolving?

When news of a problem reaches an elder, he immediately focuses on containing it with everything at his disposal.

We see peacebuilding as a divine purpose and spontaneously carry out our duties. Had we kept records of what we did in the past twenty years, you would surely be surprised, as not a single day passed without us handling at least three cases of conflict. We have been fully engaged in peacebuilding tasks throughout the past twenty years. We elders are free from political motivation, and seek no profit in return for our services. We do our work for the benefit and welfare of our people. There

is a saying: “nobility is measured by how much you give away from your own share”.

What is the traditional role of Somali elders in peacebuilding?

The elder plays a great role in peacebuilding. Somalis have a saying “God, let us not find ourselves in a thorny place, without having the means to rid us of thorns”. This is a prayer against being in a place with only wrongdoers and with no one standing for justice.

In any community, you find all types of people, good and bad. Had there been no bad people, there would be no need for an elder. The role of the elder is to create justice among men. To do that, firstly he attempts to contain a conflict as soon as it erupts. After that, he proceeds to call upon any formal authority nearby. In case the formal authority is out of reach, the elder communicates with intellectuals to help him extinguish the problem.

In Somali tradition the important question is not ‘what happened?’ but rather ‘how did it end?’ The role of the elder is therefore to be constantly prepared to respond to threats to peace. He has well-informed sources and is often among the first to know of events as they occur.

How has elders’ role changed in the past 20 years?

I believe that the role of the elder has increased substantially over the past twenty years. This is because the elder’s role changes with the number of problems and we have had more and more problems.

What qualities does an elder need to be a good peacemaker?

To be chosen a crowned elder one should be God-fearing and fair. Fear of God tends to make an elder considerate and do the right things with a sense of justice. There is a saying: “men without justice scatter as deer!” With such qualities, the good elder becomes a ‘father’ to all men under him, irrespective of their political affiliation or religious beliefs.

Other important characteristics of a good elder are being prudent, wise in judgment and, above all, patient. Patience is particularly important since the elder is often improperly challenged or verbally assaulted, or even deliberately robbed. He should be patient at such times. The good elder must be capable of making sacrifices, sometimes by taking wealth away from members of his family and giving it to others just to maintain peace.

What are the key elements that can contribute to a successful Somali-led peace process

Nothing seems to have worked to resolve Somalia’s conflict. We Somalis suffer because of individuals and groups motivated solely by personal and political interests. You may possibly find an entire nation of clerks, but never an entire nation of presidents! This led us Somalis to destitution and indignity to a point that we eventually lost face in the eyes of the world.

To reconcile as a nation, we need to have true faith once again, confess our wrongdoing and forgive one another. Application of force and suppression of freewill resolves nothing.

Why do peace processes sometimes fail?

Peace processes fail mainly for two reasons. Firstly, you find many participants are insincere. They come with hidden agendas, determined to compromise the whole process if their demands are not satisfied. Secondly, national-level peace processes almost always fall subject to political manipulation by foreign countries. Foreign countries are known to surreptitiously align with parties to the peace process, prepared to provide support if the latter fail to achieve their evil goals.

What are the hardest conflicts to resolve?

The hardest conflict to resolve is that of politics. Every political leader has people who trust him, but whom he regards as his own. Every political leader’s primary dream is to be a president. He takes advantage of the trust put in him as a means to attain that particular goal.

Pursuit of political interests leads to disputes and conflict among close friends. Experience has taught us that politics is based on false realities. In Somalia it undermines the prospects of any two

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politicians remaining committed over a significant period of time to the worthy vision of serving the common good of the people. That is why there is a constant shift in the makeup of political groupings in Somalia. Consequently, two young combatants who had been on the same side one day might be found on opposite sides in a gunfight the following day.

How could elders contribute to national reconciliation?

To be honest, during the past twenty years a number of elders were misled, either by financial incentives or under clan pressure, and joined politicians’ campaigns. There are other elders who remained true to themselves and who are devoted to peace and nation-building.

Good elders can contribute to national reconciliation, provided that the process is inclusive and that the right kind of people, those free of self interest, can participate.

Puntland is a good example. Here in Puntland, we elders and the people elect our leaders: our representatives in parliament as well as the president and vice president. We take part in decision making on key policy issues. We can therefore take Puntland as a model and have the rest of Somalia adopt a similar structure. If other regions had their own administrations, then Somalia’s problems would have been concluded in one day!

What is your vision for the complete recovery of the Somali region in terms of peace, stability and statehood?

I believe that the United Nations should directly intervene in the parts of Somalia still in active conflict and, in parallel, should provide reconstruction and development support for peaceful areas. I strongly believe that no indigenous solutions are likely to spring out of those conflict zones.

Once in full control, the UN can implement disarmament and further help the local people establish their own administrations. That way the regions currently categorized as conflict zones will be able to join wider Somalia as federal states. I see no other solution than that.

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Interview by Muctar Hersi, Puntland Development Research Center.