

The Destruction of Somalia and the Question of Regionalism
By Faisal A. Roble
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Introduction

In light of the recent debates on regionalism versus centralized unitary-based nation state as it pertains to the Somali case (see [wardheerNews.com](http://wardheernews.com) for related topics), the editorial board of WardheerNews asked me to shed some light on this matter. Following is my assessment of the tenuous relationship between core versus periphery regions or groupings within the Somalia nation state. In so doing, I will draw mainly on my training in Regionalism and Regional development at the University of California in Los Angeles in mid 1980s. (This was a time when UCLA's Graduate School of Urban and Regional Planning was shepherded by one of the foremost scholars on Regional Planning in the United States of America, John Friedmann, whose name attracted to the program names like Samir Amin, Emmanuel Wallerstein, David Harvey, Paul Frère, Manuel Castells and others who are closely associated with this field.) Having said that, I will address whether emerging Somalia's autonomous regions of Puntland and Somaliland can be classified as bottom-up regional administrations, or mere expressions of rejectionist politics seeking a level of freedom from the center, or a combination of both aspects.

The regionalist school of thought is a fairly new scholarship first brought to the U.S. academia and institutions of higher learning at the turn of the twentieth Century by European immigrants, who, along with their American and British counterparts, shaped this very field into an Anglo-American critique of neoclassical economy. In particular, scholars from Western Europe who settled at the Chicago school, among them Izzard, Walter Christaller and other former geographers, critically assessed the relationship between centers in urban areas (regions with impressive economic development), versus outlying regions within a nation state. In other words, scholars in the field showed serious interest in the tension between different regions, different socio-economic and/or ethnic conflicts over resources and political power.

Of the many issues that the advent of capitalism brought into being, acute inequality and all its attendant conflicts between core and periphery regions is a prominent feature. As John Friedmann later on coined the core-periphery concept, regions and their inhabitants are viewed as rivals, where one side seeks to oppress or subjugate another mainly for economic exploitation, and where

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regions are the embodiment of competing social groups (nations, ethnic groups, tribes, clans, religious groups). In that regard, regional differences are keenly defined as the inequality that is inherent between core regions (centers of administration in colonial/post colonial Africa), and periphery regions, where neglect is apparent.

The core-periphery theory expresses socio-cultural conflict as (1) a by-product of inequality (economic, political); (2) a condition of inequality can be solved if and when the right tool box is applied to the heart of the problem that ails the region(s). According to regionalist tool box, therefore, inequality can be worked out by minimizing social and regional inequalities, which may require legal and infrastructure reform carried out at both at the national and regional level.

Who Destroyed Somalia into conflicting Regions?

Somalia has had many ills; colonial partition of the [organic] Somali peninsula, a weak post colonial state, extreme resource shortage, foreign involvement, Ethiopia in particular, Islamic radicalism, and now the looming effects of climate change are some of the most recognizable problems. Yet, none of these factors is the main culprit in the destruction of the Somali state that had unraveled at the beginning of 1990. Rather, the number one cause to the dislocation of the Somalia state could be placed at the door steps of the elites of three major regional groupings, namely those of Puntland, Somaliland and South Central Somalia. (The later region should not be confused with the equally and similarly violent and unruly South Central region of Los Angeles, California, dominated by two competing local gangs.)

Whereas in other societies the middle class is the social force that binds different regional groupings into a national civic culture, Somalia's middle class not only destroyed the nation's governance structures, but it miserably failed to find new tools to sort out its affairs. Why? Because Somalia's elites, particularly those from the tripartite axis of power have at heart a reactionary regionalist mind-set, characterized by strong willingness to advance their regionalist goals at the expense of the collective good. It is a mind-set that seeks to allocate a disproportionately political power to members of the "tripartite axis of power" groupings, but treat the Somali society at large as no more than mere ingredients to that arrangement.

Elites from these three regional groupings have so far dominated the shaping of the Somalia question. According to Donald Horiwitz, the origins of the domination of the Somali society by these three regional groupings are found in the colonial administrations of that country. Whereas elites in Somaliland and South Central regional groupings disproportionately benefited in the form of trade, education and social benefits associated with urbanization of their regions, which served as

the administrative centers for colonial rulers (Hargaisa in Somaliland and Mogadishu in South Central), Puntland elites seized the military power of the country that guaranteed them national prominence in the affairs of the country (See Faisal Roble, Horn of Africa, Volume XXV, 2007).

These three groupings secured and cemented their political influence at the turn of the twentieth century, mainly by collaborating with colonial rulers (Italy and Great Britain) and earning client status, as stipulated in Lord Lugard's colonial theory of ruling natives through their traditional leaders of the more powerful clans. Hence, in arming these groupings and better educating their children, these groupings were placed in a more advantageous position at the departure of colonial rulers; indeed colonial powers handed to them state power and the largesse associated with it. Contrary to these groupings, those clans in Sool, Sanag or Cayn, as well as many other groupings in the Ethiopian administered Somaliland (Jigjiga and Qabridahar areas, for example), who with gusto resisted former colonial powers, are today nothing more than mere ingredients to the "tripartite axis of power."

As a result, state power-sharing has in a formulaic way reflected said tripartite axis of power-sharing since the inception of the Somalia modern state in 1960. Past Presidents and Prime Ministers, for instance, were always either from Puntland, Somaliland or South Central regions. To emphasize the import of this phenomenon, just toss the names of prominent politicians from these regions, and you get a list of "who is who?" in a portrait that reflects the tripartite axis of power-sharing arrangement (Sharmarke, Abdulrazak H. Hussein, Abdulahi Yusuf - Puntland; Egal, Ismail A. Abakor, Mohamed Hawadle Madar- Somaliland, Abdulah Isse, Adan Ade, Ali Mahdi, Caydid, Qaasim, Sharif - South Central). Somalia's rigid power sharing has a prescriptive regionalist bent structure that is based on an unequal access to power, thus giving Puntland and South Central regions the lion's share followed by Somaliland as a distant third runner up.

Between 1960 and 1969, during the so-called liberal democratic period, political power changed hands from one regional grouping's elite to another, albeit within the tripartite axis of power sharing. In a well scripted manner, the offices of Presidency and Prime Minister without exception were always occupied by members from these regions: Adan Adde, A. Sharmarke and Abdi Razak, to Egal, just to name a few. Although these leaders were honorable leaders, the political structure by which they were propelled into power was narrow and inherently unequal.

By all accounts, Somalia's political culture has been characterized by a crude domination of the political life of the country by members of the tripartite axis of power, and the limitations imposed on what members belonging to groups

outside these groupings can or can't be (e.g. they could not aspire to becoming the President or Prime Minister in their own country), precipitated the initial popular welcome the Barre regime and its experimentation with radical social mobilization enjoyed in the early days of the revolution. Soon after taking power, the Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC), led by General Barre, made a serious attempt to expand the scope of the axis of power by including more groupings into the inner circle, and thereby easing a growing uneasiness coming from some pockets outside the core regions of the tripartite axis of power. That uneasiness, particularly coming from the periphery regions was a weapon against the domination of the core groups.

In a radical expression of a meaningful political change, the Barre regime for the first time in the history of this nation - a nation that still remains hostage to a debilitating cast system and clanism - gave the second highest position in the government to an individual (General Mohamed Ali Samatar, Vice President 1) outside the confines of the dictates of the tripartite axis. Add to this the hugely complicated aspirations that the Barre regime availed to women groups; the inclusion of Maay inhabited regions in the power structure and the mostly urban dwellers or craftsmen groupings whose access to power was for the first time opened up; the Reverine regional grouping, a truly marginalized group (semi-slavery status), was elevated to full and equal citizenship, and you almost had a rearranged social contract in the Somali society. This was by no means a small feat for a military regime to aspire to accomplish.

But most of the changes that the military regime attained remained cosmetic changes. The centrality of the tripartite axis of power structure remained intact, and the Barre regime failed to completely alter the power dynamics in Somalia. As a matter of fact, as challenges mounted against its steadfastness to hang on to power, the Barre regime opted out to move away from the ideals of Socialist mobilization and regional reorganization to a calculated retreat into the politics of manipulating the tripartite political system. It did so by appealing to some of the regional groupings by invoking the formidable kinship system. ("Yaa Daarood Ismaaciilay," a call placed to the Daaorood clan, was one of the last slogans of the Barre regime).

Any appeal or reconciliation that the Barre regime presented to the threatened and despondent members of the tripartite axis of power came as a too little and too late reform in 1970s. As dissatisfaction with the Barre regime reached to all corners of the country, opportunistic elites from the tripartite groupings organized sectarian movements (Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSSDF) for Puntland, the Somali National Movement (SNM) for Somaliland, and the loosely organized United Somali Congress (USC) for South Central regions). In other words, the

Barre regimes' social mobilization, with some level of expanded access to the political power for groupings from the periphery groupings, could not withstand the combined muscle of the traditional tripartite axis of power. In December of 1990, the Barre regime was violently ousted by the disparate efforts of the elite groups from the three most influential regions in the country.

Nearly fifty years after a cohesive Somalia state was created - primarily as a joint project by a tripartite groupings of Somalia's benefactors - belonging to Puntland, Somaliland, and South Central regions - the political landscape of that nation today is nothing but cohesive. Dominant groupings are today on a destructive course of mutual annihilation. Instead of nurturing their God-given Maandeeq, whose milk they can equitably share, the middle class of Somalia has failed to reconcile its internal differences and, hence, created a power vacuum that is more and more inviting to the anarchistic radical Islamic groups. In the absence of any organized [national] group, both the weak central government, which have failed to foster a new vision of power sharing outside a structure dominated by the tripartite axis of power groupings, and the so-called grass-roots regionalist administration, may quickly fall into the hand of radical Islam.

Is Separate Regionalism A Panacea?

Because of the ongoing political violence in South Central Somalia, both Puntland and Somaliland have opted out of the unitary government system that was set up in 1960, when the Somali Democratic Republic was founded with high hopes. The emergence of "alternative politics" or regional governments (some call them mini states) in Puntland and Somaliland, organized and led by elites who are also members of the tripartite dominant groupings, have similarities and differences. Suffice here to say that Puntland seeks all the rights guaranteed to an autonomous region in a yet to be crafted federal system of government, whereas Somaliland advocates for a unilateral secession.

There is an underlying supposition that "alternative politics" devolves power to regions whose inhabitants are united by traditional customs, and where political conflicts are also resolved through the utility of traditional means of conflict resolution. To that end, both Puntland and Somaliland had impressively established functional houses of elders (guurti) which are empowered to arbitrate issues of power sharing, thus the complete "re-emergence" of traditional independent (or quasi independent states) political structures in contemporary Somalia.

"Alternative politics" is, in essence, rooted in the early forms of regionalist arguments that seek to move governance closer to the governed. The form of regionalist governments that are so far implemented in Puntland and Somaliland are at one level an active expression seeking new direction from the violent

culture of South Central regions of Somalia. That objective plus a modicum of good governance established, as well as the absence of open conflict in both regions are positive gains within the regionalist alternative. Moreover, proponents of "alternative politics" in either case would argue that this is a bottom-up model of governance that devolves power to the local regions, thus promising resolutions to the intractable governance problems faced by Somalia. However, reality on the ground does not support that a decentralized systems has been implemented in the power structure of these entities. Akin to the governance tradition of Mogadishu of yesteryears, all decision making infrastructures and power sharing are concentrated in the respective new centers of Hargaisa and Garowe.

"Alternative politics" as constituted in both regions are inherently reactionary and constitute antithesis to the concept of reforming the relationship between the core and periphery regions. As we have already touched upon, the entire philosophy of eliminating or narrowing conflict/inequality between core and periphery regions within a nation state is to positively restructure regional inequalities that have, in the past, fomented war and social unrest. Both regions have so far failed in articulating new visions to restructure/remake Somalia. And both regions are not only moving away from the common vision Somalis have cherished for generations, but they are more and more appearing to be client states for Ethiopia, hence charting a political course that is more similar to the South Central based Transitional Unity government of Sherif and Sharmarke.

In the case of Puntland, for example, troubling stories of suppressing human rights of internally displaced persons from the conflict-ridden regions of South Central Somalia and Ethiopian administered regions abound (see Buuh's excellent critique of president Farole's policies). Moreover, the rounding up of displaced persons, and at times handing refugees over to the Ethiopian government, a crime committed by both Puntland and Somaliland authorities, can be classified as draconian measures akin to dictatorship, only this time they are taking place in fiefdom enclaves.

Concluding Remarks

Before one commissions "alternative politics" as a panacea to the failed state of Somalia, we have to question whether the very elites who inexcusably destroyed Somalia are capable to construct and carry over good governance afresh at the local level. This questioning gets more complicated, when especially one pays serious attention to the marked poverty in resources (absence of agriculture or natural resources like rivers) and in governance that both regions exhibit.

For the last twenty years (in the case of Somalia) or ten years for Puntland, no

significant economic progress has been achieved. None of the regions show any meaningful economic growth. Worse, the public sector, which has been destroyed during the long civil, still lays fallow with no improvement insight.

Without any new visions coming from the so-called regionalist leaders, there might not be much hope to sustain either local- or national-based governance in Somalia. In the case of Puntland, a replica of political formula that still reflects the tradition of the tripartite power arrangement is in motion - no one has so far assumed the presidency of Puntland since the former warlord, Abdulahi Yusuf Ahmed, founded this mini state. In the case of Somaliland, Mr. Rayale Kahin is in a dire struggle to keep power from falling back into the hands of members of traditionally dominant groups.

Is it fair, therefore, to assume that if members of tripartite grouping failed the Somali state that they found in 1960, they would fail again at the local level if they are employing the same failed tools that foster not regional reconciliation but regionalism with a veiled clanist sentiment? The jury is out, the positive development we so far see both in Somaliland and Puntland notwithstanding. To complicate matters more, the widely circulated idea of a yet new local government and the persistent conflict that is latent in the disputed regions of Sool, Sanaag and Cayn do not bode well for the "alternative politics" experimented in Somaliland and Puntland. What Somalia's middle class could not sustain at the national level might not be so sustainable at the regional level.

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