

A Lesson in Somali Politics from the Grave

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Recently, while researching for a paper on science and technology career for Somali students, I came across an article called “Nation of Politicians” which was published in Mogadishu in 1968. For the oldies amongst us, this article brings nostalgia for a bygone era in Somalia when there was political debate based on issues. It was not perfect, but it was real. For the young, it would show them that there was a time in Somalia when political discourse based on policies and issues was a way of life; and freedom of expression was guaranteed by the constitution for everyone regardless of status.

Today, Somalis are still engaged in political debates; only the points of reference has changed. The “coffee-shop parliament” of forty years ago is the “fadhi ku dirir” of today. The political discourse of the “deputies” in the 1968 “coffee-shop parliament” was on the issues of the day, and debates were won or lost on arguments. Today, the “combatants” in the “fadhi ku dirir” argue over issues from clan or religious perspective and the “fight” can sometimes get ugly.

It is worth mentioning that thirteen months after Citizen Jama’s article was published, the Somali military staged a coup and overthrew the elected government of Somalia. The first act that was passed by the military junta was to abolish the rights of political association and the freedom of expression. The rest is history.

Today, Somalia looks like someone who is searching for a lost property but knows not where it was lost. This reminds me of the story of drunken man who was seen searching for his lost key in the ground under a lamppost. When asked if that was the spot where he lost it, he replied “no, but this is the only place where there is light”. We are not any different. Our mind is foggy and rational judgement eludes us when it comes to fixing our country. We are all politicians and we are all experts. At least in 1968, there was a clear argument to let people do what they were good at and not get in the way of others. We are looking for our lost nation under the lampposts of international and regional organisations (whose interests are not necessarily ours), not because that is where the solution is, but that is where is light – or so we were told.

Disclaimer: *The article “Nation of Politicians” is written by Citizen Jama. I have not modified in any way for better or for worse.*

Nation of Politicians

By Citizen Jama

Mogadishu, September 1968

One evening earlier this week, I and the other members of the “coffee-shop parliament” were sitting at our usual places and discussing something or other, when suddenly, for no special reason, my attention began to wander, and instead of listening to what was being said at my table, I looked around me at the other tables in Omar’s bar. We were by no means the only set of people discussing

with great interest and earnestness the important issues of the day. At no less than seven tables there were groups arguing, gesticulating, interrupting and pontificating, just as we “coffee-shop deputies” do.

Suddenly, I had a sort of vision. Before my eyes I seemed to see not only Omar’s coffee-shop, but all the other hundreds of coffee-shops in Mogadishu, each filled to overflowing with groups of men discussing politics. Then I saw added to these hundreds still more and more and more and more – the coffee-shops in all the other towns of the Republic – and all filled with still more arguing people. This was not yet the end: I then seemed to see groups of nomads in the bush sitting in the shade of a tree, but still discussing the same topics as their brothers in the towns – politics. I began to become dizzy.

I shook my head and the vision disappeared. But the idea remained with me. What a nation of politicians we are! Are all other people the same? As soon as the topic the others were discussing had ended, I introduced this new one with a question to Ali, our globe-trotting “deputy”. “It is often been said”, I began, “that we Somalis are a nation of politicians, and it is certainly true that if you go anywhere in the country you will find groups of people discussing the vital political issue of the day just as we do here at Omar’s. Are we unique in this, or have you found, Ali, on your travels, that other people are the same”?

Ali is a careful sort of man and as he always does he considered a moment before answering my question. “I think it is true”, he said at length, “that we are more politically-minded than most other folks – at least than most of the other people that I personally know about. As you rightly say, Jama, whenever you see two or three Somalis gathered together, you can be sure that they are discussing politics. It would be most unusual to find them talking about other people, either in Africa or in Asia or in America. I think it is true to say that if we have a national pastime it is politics – and I for one know of no other people who have the same hobby so highly-developed”.

“I am afraid you’re right, Ali”, said Osman. And I expect that you noticed that I used the word *afraid*. Well, the reason for that is that in my opinion we, as a nation, spend much too much time talking about politics that could profitably be used in some other way. This particularly applies to the young people, in my view. I hate to see them sitting together, all jabbering away about what the government should or should not be doing. They should be getting on with their education, that is what, and leave the politics until they have earned the leisure and the right to join in with the older men”.

“I can’t agree with you there, Osman”, said Abdi, interrupting just in time to stem the flood that was about to erupt from Farah, the youngest of our “coffee-shop deputies” and the champion of today’s youth, “because I believe that young people might just as well waste their time talking nonsense about politics as about any of the other things that seem to amuse them in other parts of the world – I am sports, or sex, or the latest style in shirts or whatever it might be. I can’t see that there is any real difference”.

“But don’t you see”, replied Osman, “that there is a very real and important difference? There can be no possible harm in young people spending their time talking about football because the worst that can happen is that they all go off and play a game. But if they are allowed to chatter away about politics all day, then what happens? Off they go to make a demonstration, or a sit-in, or something equally ridiculous and inconvenient for everyone except themselves”.

I could see that poor Farah’s eyes were about to pop out of his head with indignation. He can never see that the others say this kind of provocative thing just to annoy him and make him angry. Anyway, I headed him off. “You are getting off the subject, men”, I said. “We are not only talking about young

people but everyone. Do we waste too much time in talking about politics or not – and that includes the old ones as well”.

“Thank you, Jama, for keeping these rather undisciplined debaters on the rails”, said Farah with much dignity. “And may I offer a remark or two? In my view, there cannot be any such thing as a people that talk too much about politics. Real democracy depends on the people – and I mean all the people – participating in the political decisions that have to be made. And how can people make political decisions if they don’t know what they are talking about? And how are they to find out what they want to know without discussion? It is the only way. People who spend all their time talking about trivialities such as sports are neglecting their duties as citizens of a real democracy. And since young people know less about what is going on in the world around them than the old men who have lived longer in it, then it follows perfectly naturally that it is the young people who must discuss politics more than anyone else. Do you understand me, Abdi? And he glared at his brother as he said this.

Sheikh Hassan joined in at this point. “I think I can say that there is nothing in our religion that specifically encourages or discourages people from participating in politics”, he said, “but there is one point I would like to make. It is a fundamental tenet of our faith that a man should perform the function that God has assigned him to. As I see it, this means that the *geeljir* should attend to his camel, the *wadaad* to his *kutub*, the politician to government, and so on. Where I think many people – and especially young people – go wrong is in not sticking to their own jobs and leaving others alone to do theirs in peace. You all know that I am a patriotic Somali and I would rather be the poorest Somali in our country than a rich foreigner. But my love for my country does not blind me to the faults of my countrymen. One of the most important of these is that every man believes in his heart that he ought to be a minister, at least. What nonsense this is! When we go to watch a blacksmith or a weaver at work, we are not so foolish as to imagine the we could do it as well as the expert. Why, then, is it that we feel differently about politics?”

“Quite right, Sheikh”, I said. “How many times have you heard a conversation between *piantones* (who are very likely not even good sweepers, let alone politicians) who say: *Well, I say the minister ought to have* or who chat away about higher national policy without having the smallest notion about the real issues involved?”

“No, Jama, that is not fair”, said Farah. “Surely, the whole point of democracy is that everyone, whatever their status, should have an equal voice in government?”

“Too simple,” interrupted his brother. “On matters of fundamental policy, yes. But about the everyday decisions of normal government? Certainly not. Administration must be left for those who have the training and the experience to do it, just as you and I, Farah, should not try and advise the blacksmith how to make iron horseshoes.”

“I can still have my opinion, though, even about making iron, and I have the right to express it,” said Farah, obstinately.

His brother shrugged his shoulders. “Waste your time as you please,” he said. “But don’t expect me to support your right to advise the real experts – whether the politicians or the blacksmiths – on how to do their jobs. And if the blacksmith – or the politician – throws a lump of charcoal at you in return for your advice, please don’t expect me to bandage the wounds.”

We all laughed at Abdi’s sally. As no one seemed to have anything further to add, Ali summed up our debate. “There seems to be much argument,” he began, “against the contention that we Somalis are a

race of politicians – or at least a race that spends a good deal of its time discussing politics, in the *miyi* or in the *magaalo*. Whether or not this is an unmixed virtue is a matter of more difference. Some of us think that people should discuss politics as much as possible in order to take part fully in the activities of democratic government. Others believe that the *shoemaker should stick to his last*, as the English proverb says, and that people should get on with their own jobs and leave the politicians to get on with theirs. All this is really a technical argument, actually. I don't think that whatever we conclude will have any real effect on the fact that the Somali people will go on talking politics until their breath gives out. I think the best plan is to make a virtue of necessity, accept the inevitable, and merely try to ensure that our natural propensity for argument and discussion is channelled into useful activities and not allowed to distract us from our national tasks. In this way we can drive advantage from our nature.”

We all applauded Ali's sensible conclusion. Did you notice that Omar had absolutely nothing to say all the evening? I thought that it was most unusual for him to be so silent. I might have known better and I might have guessed that his contribution would be directly connected with his business, the thing closest to his heart. Well, he said, "all I know is that the day Somalis stop wanting to chat about politics, I and all the other coffee-bar owners will go out of business. It's what we live on..."