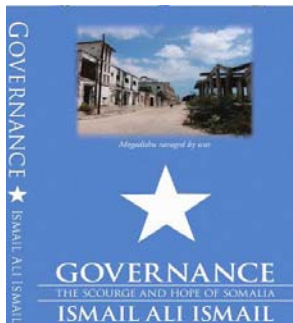


Excerpts:Governance the Scourge and Hope for Somalia

By Ismail Ali Ismail

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A strong, stable, and merit-based bureaucracy is the backbone of a stable government. It is what enables a state to weather political storms; it is what keeps the ship of state afloat and prevents it from sinking when the sea of politics is rough. Italy itself woefully lacked such a bureaucracy. Its civil service was described as “overstaffed, underpaid, inefficient, and insubordinate.”⁴⁸ The Somalis say: “Ninkaad kabo ka tolanaysid kabihisaa la’ eegaa,” which means, “Before you ask a cobbler to make you a pair of shoes, look at his own.” Clearly, if one were shopping in those days—or even now—for a good system of governance or of administration, one would not have gone to Italy. Italy simply could not have equeathed to its Somaliland what it did not itself have.



The story of governance in Somalia since independence demonstrates beyond doubt the centrality of the clan system and its preeminence over any other system which may operate under the label of “parliamentary democracy” or “Islamic rule.” The clan system had provided in ages past what Professor Lewis called a “pastoral democracy.” It is well known in the science and art of management and public administration that behind the façade of the formal organization there is an informal organization that is invariably more effective than the formal one. The clan system represents that informal organization, and it is not, therefore, something that cannot be applied to modern conditions.

It is true that Somalis have been nomadic clans—most of them still are—who were highly individualistic and fiercely protective of their freedoms and therefore averse to authority. But to imply that they had no system of self-governance is wrong. Professor S. E. Finer says in his magistral work, *The History of Government*, “Unquestionably, tribes have governments and are polities, and there have been times when the tribe conquered the state.”¹ It has also been said that local government originated with Germanic tribes. Nomadism is a mode of life which is not necessarily anarchic, for nomadic people have their own social organizations and their own traditions and laws, which impose restrictions on what an individual can do. Accordingly, Somali clans used to be ruled by two kinds of laws: Islamic law; and Somali customary law, which is called ‘xeer’. Both induced conformity and were vital aspects of self-governance. The only problem here was that the Somalis did not write their language and did not therefore codify their laws.

Somali clanism gradually degenerated over the years to a type that was peculiar, pertinacious, ingravescent and pernicious. It has proved to be the curse of the Somali people; it tore apart the very fabric of society; corrupted the intellect; and poisoned all aspects of life. Political parties have failed because of it; governance has failed because of it; educated Somalis who were supposed to free the country from its deadly morass have been hamstrung by it; and the state itself has failed and collapsed because of it. It is the one element that facilitated 'divide and rule' under Barre and is currently facilitating Ethiopian policy of 'divide and destroy'..... Each clan that suffered under the Barre regime suffered in isolation, without the other clans feeling its pain, much less coming to its rescue.

I have administered the xeer system as a district commissioner and I think it suffered from lack of adaptability to modern changes. It has been affected negatively by urbanization, education, internal migration, maladministration, political corruption and last but not least general moral decadence. Like all systems the traditional system needs people to manage it, not people to destroy it.

By Ismail Ali Ismail

Email: geeldoonia@gmail.com

Ismail Ali Ismail is the author of the new book " Governance, the Scourge and Hope for Somalia" which is to debut soon.

*Finer, S.E. The History of Government, Vol.1 "Ancient Monarchies And Empires", Oxford University Press,1997, p.2
48 John Clarke Adams and Paolo Barile, The Government of Republican Italy, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1961, p. 106*