

What went wrong with Somalia and its people?

Mahad Sheikh Ali Gelle

July 01, 2013

With today being Independence Day, many will rightly celebrate the leadership, courage, and passion of the men who gave birth to this nation. Our Founding Fathers were truly great men, but it was more than just their courage and passion that made them great leaders – it was their unyielding conviction to their values, beliefs and ideals. These men were not only some of history's greatest statesmen, soldiers, activists, and revolutionaries – they were also some of history's greatest thinkers.

1943



The Founding Fathers of Modern Somali Independence Movement- the 13 members of Somali Youth League.

Much has happened in the 53 years since men like Sayid Muhamed Abdulle Hassan, the 13 SYL leaders, and Aden Abdulle Osman Daar as the first President and Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke as Prime Minister (later to become President, from 1967 to 1969) signed the Declaration of Independence, framed the Constitution, and formed a nation.

In 1967, Muhammad Haji Ibrahim Igal became Prime Minister, a position to which he was appointed by Sharmarke. And yet, with all the advances in technology and academia, why is it today's leaders are more "educated" but so obviously less literate than our Founding Fathers?

The answer is the intellect of our Founding Fathers were formed by, and highly developed as a result of something most of our leaders today don't have – a classical education and high patriotism.



The former Somali Prime minister and later President Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke, shown on the right, with the First Republic of Somalia President Aden Abdulle Osman Daar (L). In 1967, the president was defeated in elections by his former prime minister, Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke.

Nations rise and fall with the quality of their leaders, and their leaders succeed and fail based upon who they are at their core – what they believe, how they think, and what they do. Nothing shapes a leader or a society like their education or lack thereof. Let me be clear: when I refer to an education, I'm not referencing earning a degree, but developing a rich intellect – they are not always one and the same.



September 10, 2012: The former TFG President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed with the new Federal Republic of Somalia President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, Speaker of SFP, Prof. Mohamed Sheikh Osman Jawari and the Head of the Somali National Supreme Court, Aidid Ilko-Fanah

As we celebrate our independence, I have reflected on how far we have come as a nation, and yet how much we have to learn from our predecessors. Why do we suddenly think we know better? We've lost the tools of learning that have been commonly accepted for thousands of years. We've lowered our standards, and expected too little from our children.

How is it that colonists in the 1880s, many of whom had little formal schooling, had higher levels of literacy, more expansive vocabularies and a better

command and mastery of a wide variety of subjects, than the average student today?

We are spending more money per student, awarding more degrees, and spending more time in school than ever before. Yet one could make the case that most modern Somalis are not as well read as the “graduates” of the one-room schoolhouses that equipped early Somalis.

Many who hold modern era post-graduate degrees are unable to read and comprehend the great authors even of the recent past. We focus on creativity before mechanics, self-esteem before achievement – being someone instead of doing something.

The following quote by MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION sums up the crossroads we currently face as a nation:

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION
PARTICIPANTS:

SOMALIA

Hussien Abdulkadir Kassim, Minister of Mineral and Water Resources

Ambassador Abudllahi Adu Addou (DC)

Abdurahman Jama Barre, Director General, MFA,

Mohamed Mohamud, Counselor

US

The Secretary of State- Kissinger

Under Secretary Habib

Acting Assistant Secretary Seelye

Frank Wisner (Note taker)

DATE: October 8, 1976

TIME: 3:45 p.m.

PLACE: Secretary's apartment at the Waldorf-Astoria, New York

KISSINGER: What does "Acting Foreign Minister" mean?

KASSIM: I am the Minister for Minerals and Water, but I have represented the Government at a number of international Conferences.

ADDOU: He is the de facto Foreign Minister.

KISSINGER: How long have you been in New York?

KASSIM: Over two weeks. In a few days I will return home, but. I may not go straight back. I may stop en route.

KISSINGER: It sounds like you have already made your mind up to stop.

KASSIM: I try to take care of the interests of my country and do so without fanfare.

KISSINGER: For a medium-sized country, you make a lot of news.

KASSIM: It all depends on the way the wind blows. Is it we who make the news or others who create conditions that force us to act?

KISSINGER: You should see me when I am trying to make news.

ADDOU: With the press following you so closely; you always make news.

KISSINGER: What is the state of our relations?

KASSIM: I would like to comment on that. I believe there is room for improvement.

KISSINGER: I agree with you.

KASSIM: Yes, there is room for improvement. You made a good point during your toast at lunch. You are learning about Africa.

KISSINGER: I have learned a lot from watching African politics. You Somalis are rough. I do not mean that as a criticism, but you play tough internal politics.

KASSIM: We speak our hearts and minds.

KISSINGER: I don't believe that the African states as a group are hostile, but if you look at the actions of the Somali Government, you can hardly judge them to be nonaligned. On almost every international issue you oppose us. We can't be wrong all the time. The law of averages does not work that way.

KASSIM: From our point of view, Somalia and the United States should have relations which are devoid of hostile feelings. On specific questions or policies,

a matter of judgment enters in and not all our expressions are hostile. Had you not felt hostility, we would not have reacted. We believe we are non-aligned.

KISSINGER: We are not against non-alignment. Every African state is non-aligned except possibly for Angola. Fifteen thousand foreign troops present a powerful argument for taking sides. While you say there is no hostility on the part of Somalia, you disagree with us regularly and sometimes you work against us.

KASSIM: That is not an unfair picture but it is an incomplete one. We follow the actions of the United States as they affect us and our region. For us the existence of the Somali nation is at stake. Your actions have not always indicated neutrality.

KISSINGER: Would you give me an example?

KASSIM: Somalia has had an unfortunate colonial past. Even before Somalia became independent, you had pacts with Ethiopia. We have seen arms flow to Ethiopia which we - believe to be detrimental to the good relations between Somalia and Ethiopia. We believe our relations can be improved, but the arms you send and the propaganda you make do not help. We saw the statement by your Secretary of Defence.

KISSINGER: Why do we think that you have more military equipment than Ethiopia?

KASSIM: That is wrong. Ethiopia has more strength than we do. You force us to build up. We do not see you playing a role in finding a solution.

KISSINGER: You want a part of Ethiopia.

KASSIM: No, we want freedom for the part of Ethiopia which belongs to our people.

KISSINGER: Is that part of Ethiopia inhabited by Somalis and when did it join Ethiopia?

KASSIM: The Ethiopians took the southern portion of their country which was inhabited exclusively by Somalis in 1884. Until 1960 Ethiopians were present in small administrative and military groups. Now they have reinforced their control and the situation is different.,

KISSINGER: So you will be hostile until you obtain the rest of your territory.

KASSIM: The other way around. We do not renounce the rights of our people and our nation. We suffer from a colonial situation.

KISSINGER: There are Somalis in northern Kenya. Do you claim Kenyan territory as well?

KASSIM: That is an historical fact. The British Government organized a Province in 1963 for what they called the Northern Frontier Province. It had always been administered separately from the rest of Kenya. Eighty-six percent of the population voted to join Somalia but the British decided otherwise, and might have made it right. We do not blame Kenya because the solution was imposed by a colonial power. We blame Ethiopia more since Ethiopia's act was a deliberate one of colonialism. We have Ethiopian documents proving the point. When the European nations began scrambling for territory in Africa, Menelik II wrote to the colonial powers and said "We also want to get our part." Ethiopia almost overran us in its aggression in 1963 and 1964. Had outside powers not intervened, disaster would have befallen both parties.

KISSINGER: There is little we can do about history but as you know, Ethiopia's relations with us are not excessively intimate. Can you figure out what is going on in Ethiopia?

KASSIM: We are closer and have a better understanding. There are pressures working/ We cannot cover every subject in this meeting. We would prefer to talk about the present. We want you to listen to us and we want to listen to you. The cause of unhappy relations between the United States and Somalia stems from our serious national problems. We want peaceful solutions to these problems. Even before our revolution in 1969, we had sought an understanding with Ethiopia. Our President has met with Ethiopian leaders to promote an atmosphere of understanding and one in which just solutions can be found. There has never been a positive response. These matters are so important to Somalia that we cannot denounce our rights but we will not behave belligerently. We will not take advantage of Ethiopia's weakness. We seek to develop our nation and our region. We do not want war, especially with near kinsmen like the Ethiopians. We have made overtures of goodwill to Kenya within the context of African understanding. Perhaps a day will come when these problems will be solved. With respect to our relations, the role of your government is decisive. You should seek peace, security, stability, and the promotion of understanding. We know you have provided assistance to other African countries. We believe assistance should go to development and not to arms.

KISSINGER: We suffer under the impression that you are better armed than Ethiopia. Perhaps our intelligence is wrong, but we see you getting large quantities of Soviet arms.

KASSIM: We were invaded in 1963 and 1964. Ethiopia has traditionally enjoyed superiority both in hardware and the size of its army. You misunderstand our situation.

KISSINGER: I will take another look at our intelligence.

KASSIM: We believe there is a role for you to play, we are aware of your history and your principles. We don't understand your hostile attitude towards a small state. Look what you did during our drought.

KISSINGER: Talcott, what did we do?

SEELYE: We provided assistance.

KASSIM: Yes, but you said we had a Soviet base and we invited observers to come and see for themselves.

KISSINGER: That is right. And all of them came to the same conclusion--even those who were opposed at the outset. They left convinced that you had a Soviet base.

KASSIM: Do you believe that?

KISSINGER: I believe we can survive a Soviet base on Somalia territory, but I guess it depends on how you define a base. If you define a base as a place where military personnel are stationed and service military equipment that is a base. In the Philippines, after we sign our new agreement, the Philippine flag will fly over American bases, but we do not deny that we have bases.

KASSIM: You need to know more about the nature of our people. We will never permit a foreign base. We have no bases or facilities. We have seen pictures from your satellites and know that you said we had missiles. We checked your allegation and found what you called a missile was in fact a minaret of a Mosque.

KISSINGER: Perhaps you are tricky and hide missiles in minarets.

KASSIM: We opened the Mosque for your observers to visit. We do not have the money to buy missiles.

KISSINGER: We don't believe they are your missiles. But feel towards let us get off this. We hostility/Somalia. Nevertheless, we find in every international forum you oppose us. You opposed our initiative in southern Africa. Somalia is in the forefront of those harassing us and we are working for peace and in close cooperation with Front Line Presidents. We are prepared to improve our relations and don't object to your territorial claims as long as you do not seek to use force in settling your disputes.

KASSIM: There is reason to improve our relations, and there may be an opportunity to do so. We need to be clear about each other's positions. We lack consultations. U.S. neutrality is not enough. We want you to play an active role in solving our problems.

KISSINGER: I will take a look at the question of the military balance. We have no reason to take sides in your relations with the Ethiopians. posture,

KASSIM: If you are prepared to adopt a neutral/ why don't you help contribute to peace?

KISSINGER: If I became involved in any more African problems I will lose my sanity. I will think about it.

KASSIM: We look for a change in your attitude.

KISSINGER: What can we do?

KASSIM: Bluntly, you can cause the bullet to be dislodged from the gun. We believe you should reconsider your strategy in East Africa.

KISSINGER: Would you stop military equipment coming from the Soviet Union if we stop deliveries to Ethiopia?

KASSIM: We are not receiving military equipment from the Soviet Union as you think. We are trying to build an army to defend our frontiers which are very long. In 1964 we were attacked and were without defence. If one party receives arms and we do not, the situation becomes dangerous.

KISSINGER: If we don't send arms to Ethiopia and you continue to get them from the Soviet Union there may be a war.

KASSIM: But you have given \$200 million in military equipment to Ethiopia.

KISSINGER: That's impossible. We have only given \$60 million to all of Africa.

KASSIM: Ethiopia has ten divisions. We only have two. When you ask us to stop, what do you mean? Future arms deliveries or present deliveries?

KISSINGER: Talcott, how much are we giving Ethiopia?

SEELYE: \$10 million to \$20 million this year.

KASSIM: I stick to my version. We know you are giving \$200 million.

KISSINGER: This is insane.

HABIB: Perhaps if you count deliveries over past years some figure like the one the Minister mentions might be the case.

KISSINGER: We have no reason to lie to you; we tell you what is true.

KASSIM: We would appreciate the information.

KISSINGER: It is all in the public record. Such information is easy to obtain.

KASSIM: Such large grants fuel tensions.

KISSINGER: I think you are wrong.

KASSIM: Let's hope I am wrong.

KISSINGER: Can you give me an idea of what we should do--concretely?

KASSIM: Yes, We look forward to an attitude of American goodwill toward Somalia and we will respond. Once suspicion is dispelled, we can move to develop cooperation in other areas.

KISSINGER: How can we dispell suspicion?

KASSIM: By stopping your military equipment.

KISSINGER: Do you act as Foreign Minister in Somalia?

KASSIM: I help the President and the Foreign Ministry.

KISSINGER: I will ask our Ambassador to have a general talk on how we can improve our relations. Let's see where this takes us. Who should we talk to?

ADDOU: You should talk to Dr. Abdurahman. He comes from the Foreign Ministry.

SEELYE: Our Ambassador has had trouble in making appointments.

ADDOU: That is not correct. Your Ambassador has full access. Just like you, our people are busy. Sometimes he has to wait three or four days, but so do all Ambassadors.

KISSINGER: I will ask our Ambassador to get together with you and begin a general exchange of views. I want to thank you. We feel no hostility and you have nothing we want but we have the impression you systematically oppose us.

End of the conversation

The histories don't lie. Our predecessors were great leaders. Our failure to demand of our politicians what they are capable of is resulting in our failure to compete in the global politics. We are less literate, and less educated than many of our regional competitors. It was C.S. Lewis who said, and with whom I agree, "We all want progress, but if you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road."

The only way for our nation to survive the trying times of the present, and what will likely be the difficult times ahead, is to replace the commoditization of politics with a passion for developing our greatest national treasure – the rich intellect of our people.

Thoughts?

Mahad Sheikh Ali Gelle

E-mail: mahadgeelle@gmail.com

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