



Gaas and the Floundered Presidency

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Part I

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Introductory Remarks

“To whom much is given, much is required,” goes one of the oldest biblical sayings that has morphed into a universal measurement of privilege and responsibility. Much was given to Abdiweli Gaas (President Gaas), and much is expected. How much of this edict he had satisfied is the subject of this two-part essay.

Part I will be about my personal acquaintance with Gaas, while part II will focus on (1) his political wishy-washiness; (2) his failure to move the region towards an electoral system beyond clan politics; and (3) a runaway corruption which he presides over. The portion on corruption will primarily focus on how President Gaas managed the \$15 million paid to him as an installment in the renting of Bossaso port to DP, and the illegal act of printing Somali monetary notes.



Getting to Know President Gaas

I met President Gaas for the first time in December, 2006 at a conference that I helped organize for [*Northern Somalis for Peace and Unity \(NSPU\)*](#), whose objectives included to develop a counter narrative to secession and to promote the territorial integrity of Somalia. With me on the frontline of this organization were Gamal Hassan (Minister for Planning and International Cooperation), Ahmed Hassan (Minister of the Presidency – Jubbaland), Ismail Ali Gaidoon, the late Abdale Hirad, Kamal Hamud, and several other comrades. Held at the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), December 1-2, 2006, the conference assembled over 100 Somalis from different regions and backgrounds.

Among the invitees were Ali Khalif Galaydh, Ali Abdulrahman Hersi, the late Burci Hamsa, Ali Faqi, Ahmed Nasir Abdi, Ahmed Hamud, Mohammed Maasheeye, Ahmed Ismail, Abukar Arman, Ali Bahar and Abdiweli Gaas, to just name a few. It was an effort to show Somali unity.

At the time of the Conference, Abdiweli Gaas was the least active on Somalia issue (see link on [NSPU Conference and participants](#)).

Until that time, I did not know President Gaas at all. Neither have I seen him or known him during the Pan-Somali discussion groups the likes of ISRAAC or earlier groups. In the 1990s and beyond, many Somali intellectuals and professions were connected through email lists to engage the Somalia crisis. I don't recall ever seeing Abdiweli Gaas in those groups.

The second time I met President Gaas was in Toronto at a conference organized by Abdi Hosh, currently Minister for Constitutional Review, and his comrades under the banner of SomaliaMove. Gaas and I had a brief encounter at the lobby area of the Holiday Inn hotel, Mississauga, where both of us stayed; after a brief exchange of niceties, we departed company. Henceforth, our relation became only meaningful following subsequent multiple telephonic conversations between 2007 and 2009. Mostly small but substantive talks characterized our infrequent contacts.

President Gaas was gracious enough to call me, I believe from Atlanta, when Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo, Somalia's Prime Minister at the time, offered him the job of Minister for Planning. Once he settled in Mogadishu, and especially after he became Prime Minister (June 2011 to October 2012), President Gaas and I kept infrequent contacts with each other.

In general, President Gaas is a decent and a good-natured person and I will always respect him for that. His leadership qualities are entirely a different subject.

When I met him in Rome to partake in a consultative meeting hosted by an affiliate of the Italian foreign Ministry – [Istituto Affari Internazionali \(IAI\)](#) - in May, 2015, I saw a man who puts less effort into the sociopolitical issues facing the country. As a matter of fact, I saw in Rome a man who does not like discourse and problem-solving regarding the challenges his region or the nation at large is facing. Instead, I met a man who is wedded to his smart phone through which he listens obsessively old Somali songs he used to listen when he was growing up in Dusa Mareeb. Rarely has he shown interest in political or social discussions. This trait of President Gaas' bewildered me!

A second conference I participated with him took place at Tufts University in October 2013. Under the title of "Patterns of Violence in Somalia," Alex de Waal organized it and invited many academics and practitioners. President Gaas, also an invitee, was at the time living in Addis Ababa and was working on what has [become his memoir](#). After we finished the conference in Boston, President Gaas invited me to a political rally that his supporters organized at Harvard University. I accepted the invite but declined to take sides on the competition between him and Abdirahman Faralo. President Gaas was uncharacteristically cruel to his opponent, and waged a take-no-prisoner campaign. Just like Trump, he ranted and extremely inflated what he would do for Puntland.

The night of the scheduled event, many enthusiasts packed the hallway. As promised, I attended the event but largely ignored the agenda of the night, and instead spoke in general terms on global issues about Somalia and the failures of Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud's administration. Hassan Sheikh Mahmoud, who was the President of the Federal Republic of Somalia at the time, was a huge disappointment to the nation. I completely downplayed Gaas' political campaign. As will be discussed in the following section, his engagement in big ideas did not meet anyone's expectations.

Education vs. Vision

President Gaas is perhaps the most educated – that is formal education – executive officer Somalia ever had. With a Ph.D. in economics from George Masson University and a certificate on taxes from Harvard's School of J. F. Kennedy for Public Policy, President Gaas has impressive credentials in formal education. What is also remarkable about President Gaas is that he pulled himself by the "bootstraps," as Americans would like to say. In addition to his humble beginning - a child from Somalia's forbidding arid countryside where members of his family have been famished to death by the 1974 famine Somalis called "dabo-dheer," (the long-tailed famine), his achievements educationally and professionally are remarkable.

As a Prime Minister in the government of Sharif Ahmed, most people would agree that President Gaas has done a decent job, mainly thanks to his team of "*Saviors of the Nation* or "*Badbaado Qaran*." In short, he was getting the counsel of a strong diverse technocratic team.

Once he took power in Puntland, however, he chose to surround himself with a less diverse and less capable people. Without "*badbaado Qaran*" on his side, his train derailed fast. As Puntland's chief executive, he has proven to be ambivalent to ideas and input, less transparent and indecisive. I have a direct experience of these traits of his, and the following three examples will illustrate.

First, as soon as President Gaas took office, I assembled for him about 20 well educated and professional Somalis from all regions with the idea of giving him counsel on many areas free of charge. We expected that a positive influence radiating from his court could be a catalyst beyond Garowe. Alas, after one telephonic meeting, President Gaas disappeared and never reached out to the team until we disbanded it.

Second, I saw early on how less transparent Gaas Presidency was about to become. The potential floundering of Gaas' presidency was gleaned from his failure to hire a highly qualified "anti-corruption czar;" As soon as he assumed office, a number of us shared with him a couple of potential candidates for the post. The thinking was to show the people of Puntland as well as the rest of Somalia that President Gaas was "serious" about fighting corruption.

Without ever saying no, he slowly but surely killed the effort. Instead he institutionalized the culture of corruption and let it thrive under his watch. In lieu of "anti-corruption czar," President Gaas decided to invite a close friends of his from Canada, someone with no experience in public

policy, and put him in charge of all public works projects (airports, road constructions and as a liaison to World bank and other donors).

In addition to a hefty salary paid to this individual through donor monies, he became a powerful non-portfolio kitchen cabinet and a confidante of President Gaas, often accompanying him to the president's frequent overseas trips. It is ironic that almost after four years in his reign, Puntland is gripped by a chronic culture of corruption (Part two will revisit this issue).

The third example comes from my meeting with him in Rome (May 2015). Hearing about my looming departure, some concerned members of the diaspora both from Puntland and elsewhere heaped on me complaints, advises and recommendations to forward them to him. I sat with him privately following my arrival in Rome and told him that I am carrying messages (“fariin”) from all over the US and Canada. Before even listening to the contents of the message, he so negatively reacted and right away became defensive: “what do they want of me,” (“maxay iga rabaan,”) he said with a visible sense of paranoia. At that point, I decided to roll back my level of conversation and decided to not bother him with messages and complaints coming from many corners of his constituents.

Although President Gaas is well-educated, he is extremely handicapped in executive work experience. Outside a brief stint as an associate professor of a small state university, he does not have the necessary qualities of a leader – transparency, humility, seeking input from capable people, seizing big ideas and momentous opportunities and so forth. He also does not come across as someone with a sense of urgency, especially in times of crisis (I will deal with this in part two drawing on the case of Alshabab's invasion of the beach town of Gara'd in March 2016 and his nonchalant reaction).

Worse, he exhibits serious intellectual limitations in formulating policies or unpacking complex public policy and social issues; I have seen these traits of his in close proximity in two occasions – in Boston and in Rome.

The Boston conference assembled both academics and practitioners, some coming from Nairobi and Addis Ababa. Given his direct experience with the transitional period, his in-depth involvement in development projects across the country, and the complexities of Somalia's politics, I expected a lively presentation and discussions from President Gaas. It was a huge disappointment to say the least! Some of us in private later on talked about how disappointing his participation was. High hopes for his presentation were dashed right away.

The second time we meet was at the Rome conference - a high level seminar - (*Somali Perspectives: Institutional and Policy Challenges*) held in Rome, where both of us spoke on the challenges facing the implementation of federalism in the Somali context. One of the questions put forth to President Gaas was challenges the clan factor presents for Somalia's new initiative to move to federalism. The answer he gave was greatly disappointing and showed me a side of his with intellectual simplicity.

I was lost when he seemed to accept without qualifications the centrality and absoluteness of clan politics in Somali: “we are clans and if we are divided accordingly, so be it,” was his answer to this complex question; he implied that clan based federalism was acceptable to him, literally limiting his analysis of Somalia’s complexities to a simple lineage division.

I could imagine how flattery this should have sounded to Somalia’s former colonial power, Italy – a Somali academic and statesman sectioning colonial concepts that Somalis cannot organize themselves outside the construct of clan lineage was a gift to our host.

A learned man/woman is expected to squeeze the brain and think a bit deeper when confronted with complex sociopolitical issues such as the role of clan in the Somali society. Compare Gaas’ simplistic response to one given about Somali kinship by the late Dr. Hussein M. Adan (Hussein Tanzania).

Clan and lineage antagonisms do not preclude a will to unite or a feeling of common destiny...Somali tribal genealogies serve both to distinguish clan-families and clans and; at the same time, to remind them all of common ancestry.

In this classic essay, “Language, National Consciousness and Identity – The Somali Experience,” Dr. Hussein discusses clan both as a dividing force during conflict times, but at the same time a tool to rally and mobilize Somalis to unite against adverse forces. By delineating clan in this dual nature helps come up with tools to enhance its positive aspects while suppressing the negative ones. Additionally, Hussein shows intellectual browse in that he took Western epistemology and gave a Somali-centered synthesis.

On my part, I could not contain myself after hearing President Gaas’ complete resignation to the notion that Somalis are condemned to the negative vagaries of clan and would only establish a federal system based on clan. I had to disagree, and I am not sure whether he got my drift, but this is what I said:

Federal project is the only possibility for Somalia to rebuild its institutions, avoiding fragmentation along clan lines. Reconstruction of Somalia should be based on a new concept of Somalia, one that is no longer based on tribes and clans, but formed by federal regions. That is because, clans are shifting entities susceptible to the manipulation of political leadership. In this journey to federalism we should be able to use regions only as administrative units and not as geographic expressions of competing clans.

One has to think a bit harder to see Somalia in a larger sociological context than only in the unique narrow confines of clan cacophonies. Like many other societies, the clan factor is only one of many social factors the Somali society has or being organized around; it is not the only social factor and should not be the only institution to be used when formulating policy towards the reconstruction of the Somalia polity. Gender, clan, region, religion, class, urban, and rural dynamics are some of the ostensible variables that weigh on the reconstruction of Somalia.

Some politicians like President Gaas believe one or both of two things: they either out of intellectual laziness revert back to the clan factor as the unit of analysis for all Somalia's ills, or they consciously choose the clan factor because they know how to manipulate it to seize power. Most often than not, these two groups intersect and at times morph into one political class, and President Gaas is an indispensable member of this political class – a notoriously opportunistic class that dragged Somalia to the gutters.

The Floundered Presidency

After a bitterly waged campaign, on January 8, 2014, the residents of Puntland voted into office President Gaas for a five-year term; he became the fifth president since 1998. By a margin of only one vote, Senator Abdirahman Farole was unseated. Like other Somali leaders who have accepted the agony of defeat with humility so did Senator Farole, and that was in the interest of moving forward with good governance and democratization.

With much fanfare and celebration, a large section of the Somali society including myself welcomed the highly touted presidency of President Gaas. We all likened his election to political maturity in Puntland. Expected of him were a number of deliverables: To bring Garowe and Villa Somalia closer; to promote federalism that is built on the concept of regions; to usher good governance that is free from maleficence and corruption; and to move toward democratization in Puntland's electoral process.



Three and a half years later, it appears that the Presidency of Gaas had floundered and hopes for improved governance in Puntland are being dashed. None of the deliverable expected of him are achieved. Rather, today the region is barely hanging to its long established peace; politics has not inched forward from a narrow vision of sub-clan politics, maladministration, a runaway corruption in its ugliest forms, and a downgraded economic activity all weigh heavily on the region. As a direct consequence of Gaas' ineffective leadership, Puntlanders have lost cohesion, infight is more pronounced than prior years, and even the often reserved elders and traditional leaders are breaking their silences one at a time.

In a recent desperate move to divert public scrutiny from his office, he attempted to undermine Villa Somalia in a sinister way. His impromptu memorandum (August 16, 2017) to oppose the position Villa Somalia took on the Gulf conflict is in total contravention to the federal system. According to the Draft constitution, Article 54, *Power Allocation*, the formulation and commission of foreign policies in all forms are reserved for the federal government.

By responding to a huge public outcry (most Puntlanders sided with Villa Somalia on the matter), he gave an interview to the VOA Somali section to remake his bruised lame action. He argued that his memorandum was meant to give a constructive input to the federal government. Contrary to his belated remake, most Somalis believe that he has tried to sabotage the federal position.

In deed Article 53 of the Draft constitution requires of the federal government to guarantee a role of *consultation* [only] to member states. But in no way does this article authorize President Gaas to sabotage the federal government in such a sensitive matter. Besides, the matter has been set aside as far back as this past June and is no longer on the front burner of any of the belligerent parties. Remarkably, most Puntlanders condemned President Gaas' sinister move and largely ignored his remake lame interview.

Unforgivable is how permanently President Gaas corrupted the legislative branch which hitherto helped Puntland weather past challenges. What was once the envy of other parts of Somalia is today so discredited that it is a zest pool of corruption and incompetency; the clan appropriation of seats is not working and seems to have finally hit its natural limitations.

Worse, the executive branch is nothing more than a one-man show. And that one man is, to add insult to injury, an absentee landlord akin to the proverbial New York's absentee slum (ghetto) landlord. Since he took office, President Gaas has shown propensity to stay away from the region. His regular jetting in and out of Garowe's airport is unprecedented. The frequent reception by mothers who take off days from work to entertain him at the airport after each and every trip he makes is a powerful reminder of Chinua Achebe's "A Man of the People."



Dressed in colorful garments and waving different flags, one for Somalia, one for Puntland, and several others for different local neighborhoods, the mothers stand on the dusty runways of airports only to sing, albeit in empty stomachs, for the big man. With ever waning voices and covering their mouths from the dust particles, they chant "so dhawaada, so dhawaada" to the delight of the big man.

In return, occasionally dispatching kisses through air with rare thumbs up to the mothers, he waives his buffy right hand and walks delicately over the dust and exudes self-importance. Seeing these images easily reminds one the 1980s song of "Land Cruiser" by the late Saado Ali. The lyrics in the son portrayed a well-fed government functionary who cruises around in a land cruiser while the indigent are hungry:

*Laankuruusor gado soo bari Galey;
Guuxiisa mood Gob inaad naad ku tahay;
Geeska Afrika.*

*You lavishly buy Land Cruiser;
yet beg for food aid to feed your starving people;
it is so sad you think of yourself as the chosen;
But, you ain't.*

Many people offer different theories why President Gaas is having difficulty in staying the beautiful statehouse which was built by his predecessor. Some cite outlandish reasons that are personal to the President that may or may not be credible to recite them here. Others say that Garowe is too small of a cosmopolitan town to contain him. Nevertheless, his frequent trips outside the country are unprecedented, and indeed irresponsible.

(Part II will follow soon)

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