

**Somalia at Sixty (Part 1): Brief Historical Reflections, 1960-69**  
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Sixty years ago this week, Somalia's march to independence began by the union of the former Trust Territory of Somalia under Italian administration and former British Somaliland. This is the first of a series of articles commemorating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our political independence. The themes covered include (a) brief historical reflections of the post-colonial state; (b) ideas for reconciliation, and (c) the need for a new leadership with great vision in 2021.

There's no one better to act as our point of reference to help us sift through the notions of independence and self-governance in post-colonial Somalia than the late Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal (August 15, 1928 – May 3, 2002), third Prime Minister of the Somali Republic and later President of Somaliland, who in his famous words spoken at the [BBC Somali Service on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1960](#) put forward an uncannily prescient question:

*"I think we've all heard the response of the Colonial Secretary today, and I believe you are fully versed that the matter has been concluded in our favour. We've started the talks on the day we arrived, on Monday. I believe the British have already decided on the matter, and had their decision to hand. Essentially, the idea (on the part of the British) was to ascertain what we as people wanted, the (independent) state or government we wanted to create, and was this something that people were united about, and will be run by people*



*who are capable of running a country? That was what they were trying to verify. In the first two days that we met with them, they were trying to work out who was there and what they wanted? Do we really mean what we are saying? Or are we just emotionalizing? Then once that was clear in their mind, on Wednesday afternoon, yesterday, the Colonial Secretary came to us, and made the speech that we've just heard about. The gist of what he said was that on July 1<sup>st</sup>, we have to become an independent state so that we can unify with our brothers in Somalia. We're at the end of a long trudge, but we now have to trudge up a more difficult and much longer track. It is possible to campaign for statehood and that is what we have done and, as you can see, achieved it. But what is more difficult, which is the path that we're now on, is that having secured our statehood, we've got to establish an effective state and that requires a lot of hard work, and we also have to endure the rigours of the process.*

*So today, we've successfully won the first part of the battle. But the path ahead is a bigger battle. It was said about the Prophet of Allah (sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam), having just returned from a major armed combat, all the companions of the prophet being weary, as everyone was settling down, worn out, the prophet is said to have said: "We have just come out from the minor combat, and we're now going into the major one". The Prophet was then asked by the companions: "Oh, Prophet of Allah, it never occurred to us that we'll be getting into a bigger combat than the one we have been in today; so what would this other one be?" The Prophet (sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam) answered: "The combat that we took part in today was one whereby we were fighting to defeat a (physical) enemy; the combat we are entering now is one whereby we'll be fighting the enemy within ourselves: to do good and to avoid doing wrong. So for us today, we got rid of foreigners from our country. We've completed that process, as they will be leaving by July. We shall be unifying with our Somali brothers on that day in July; and we shall be governing our country, our national interest, and our faith. [Truly] the real task is to the one who will have to do all of this governing because that will be a huge task. And the question is this: are we able to self-govern ourselves? Because for far too long we have said that no foreigner should rule over us, and that we shall rule ourselves. The foreigner is no more. We've been left to our own devices. Whether we shall be able to self-govern ourselves or not, the world will be watching! May God help us."*

Prime Minister Egal's question is too deep to answer in one or two articles, but let's deal with the preliminaries first. Somalia had a succession of elected civilian governments, which Mr. Egal himself was a prominent member, until the dawn of the military coup in October 1969. The dominant political party was the SYL (Somali Youth League), a progressive nationalist and pan-Somali movement that had originated as a youth club in 1943. Both the first and second civilian Presidents, Aadan Abdulle Osman and his first prime minister Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke (later to become the second President of the Republic in 1967) were from the SYL.

At independence, Somalia was blessed with societal homogeneity, its people united by common descent, history, culture and language (albeit with regional dialect differences), a rare coincidence of political and cultural boundaries in the state patchwork of post-colonial Africa. I believe it was Alexis de Tocqueville, 19<sup>th</sup> century French aristocrat and political scientist, who famously remarked that "the tie of language is perhaps the strongest and the most durable that can unite mankind." Sadly, despite this august heritage of homogeneity and national consciousness, Somali society did not provide a solid foundation for the building of a successful state capable of fulfilling the high hopes that people entertained during decolonization.



According to the late I. M. Lewis, Somali people's traditions of 'segmented clan structure' meant that the operative framework of reference remained unchanged, and the relevant level of political action was still the kinship unit and the clan, first and foremost. Even the development of a strong nationalist movement and of a lively parliamentary democracy did little to change these traditional allegiances which remained fundamental in politics, government and administration.

Clan nepotism became a deeply entrenched phenomenon, tending to weaken governments and the civil service, where kinship ties were more important than education or ability.<sup>1</sup>

The many problems attending the administrative and economic integration of the two regions were also a cause for considerable political friction in the following years and constituted an additional hindrance to political cohesiveness. From the outset northerners felt they did not get their fair share of the new national government. Perhaps as an indication of a mounting discontent in the north, in the national referendum held in June 1961, the north overwhelmingly rejected the proposed constitution, and when this was adopted by a large vote of support in the south, a group of junior officers in the north staged an abortive coup to dissolve the union of the two regions. Although this revolt was quickly put down, it pointed to the need to improve communications between Hargeisa and Mogadishu and at last spurred the government to action.

We have to remember the difficulties of the time facing Somali leaders (who themselves were coming from a very modest, almost non-existent, background in terms of education and technical sophistication) who have chosen to guide their nation, not only were the resources available to them limited in quantity and subject to external forces, but the internal forces and tensions which fueled political action at the time were particularly hard to manage. The claim by Lewis and others of a ‘continuing strength of parochial clan loyalties and political patronage’ may have some merit in it, but the mechanics of integrating the civil service, the judiciary and education between the two regions had largely been achieved by 1964.<sup>2</sup>

Post-colonial Somalia thus was a far cry from most new states of Tropical Africa where state-builders seeking to create politically relevant cultures faced hundreds of heterogeneous ethnic communities and tribal societies arbitrarily bunched together within the artificial boundaries imposed during the colonial period. Under these circumstances, the “national” representative institutions set up hastily during the end of the colonial period have tended, after independence, to remain fragile and non-functional in the process of government.

Two of the main classic pieces of research on the study of comparative politics and political development in Africa at the time were (1) James Coleman and Carl Rosberg’s *Political Parties and National Integration in Tropical Africa*,<sup>3</sup> and (2) C. P. Potholm’s *Four African Political Systems*.<sup>4</sup> Both works have lauded the level of democratic political development and national integration in Somalia at the time.

Here’s Coleman and Rosberg’s assessment: “The Somali Republic and Cameroun are the only examples of integration of two colonial territories, each of which had been administered by a different European power. The former stands alone, however, in two respects: (1) the people of the two entities being integrated share a common (i.e., Somali) culture and language; (2) political groups have tended to be Pan-Somali, rather than territorial, in character.”<sup>5</sup> A. A. Castagno who has conducted fieldwork in Somalia during the period adds: “Tribal differences have not prevented political party leaders from focusing attention on

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, I. M. (1991) ‘The Recent Political History of Somalia’. In Barcik, K. and Normak, S. (1991) *Somalia: A Historical, Cultural, and Political Analysis*. Uppsala, Sweden: Life and Peace Institute, pp. 5-15.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, I. M. (1991), *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Coleman, James S., & Rosberg, Carl G., eds., (1966) *Political Parties and National Integration in Tropical Africa*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

<sup>4</sup> Potholm, C. P. (1970) *Four African Political Systems*. Englewood Cliffs. NJ: Prentice Hall.

<sup>5</sup> Coleman & Rosberg (1966), *op. cit.*, p. 11

national goals and spreading the thought patterns of nationalism. Nor have these differences prevented them from viewing and resolving problems in their national context”.<sup>6</sup>

C. P. Potholm’s study of comparative politics and political development in Africa at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> decade of independence looked at four political systems: South Africa, Tanzania, Somalia, and Ivory Coast, and compared them along the following four major categories: (1) participation in the decision-making process of the political system; (2) capability analysis which is the ability of the political system to organize its human and natural resources, and to implement its goals; (3) the goals chosen and their relationship to the international environment; and (4) the development of institutions, attitudes, and values that form the political power system of society.<sup>7</sup>

Potholm found that democratic politics in a multiparty framework worked in Somalia from the beginning because that framework reflected the basic societal values: decentralized political power, an egalitarian ethos, and a pattern of widespread participation in traditional politics. In essence, the political system became a projection of Somali society, and the system grew to fit in as local participatory democracy was extrapolated to the national level. Since independence, the political system has functioned effectively, aided by the basic cultural unity of the Somali people and their agreement on the primary goals of the system.<sup>8</sup>

Potholm noted that there has also been ‘a discernible pattern of regime alteration in terms of personnel’. That this has been done without bloodshed and without force is in itself a major accomplishment. There have been two presidents, Aden Abdulle Osman (1960-61 and 1961-67) and Abdirashid Ali Shermarke (1967-69), and four prime ministers, Abdullahi Issa (1956-60), Abdirashid Ali Shermarke (1960-64), Abdirazak Haji Hussein (1964-67), and Muhammad Ibrahim Egal (1967-69). President A. A. Osman relinquished power peacefully and Somalia became the first (maybe the last) African country in which power was transferred from one faction to another without political violence. Furthermore, a series of regularly scheduled elections on the municipal, district and national level, as well as within the party bureaucracy together with virtually unrestricted participation in the political life of the nation ensure fairly frequent alteration of decision-making personnel on all levels.<sup>9</sup>

A corollary to the process of the regime alteration and one which underscores the level of political development and sophistication already attained in Somalia is the rehabilitation of personnel. Even when an individual has been voted out of office or has made a political mistake of considerable magnitude, according to Potholm, he can expect to subsequently have the opportunity to redress the mistake and eventually play an active life in the political activities of the Republic. Defeated candidates for major political office are not shot, exiled, or jailed: they continue to participate in politics. For example, Abdullahi Issa, who was Prime Minister from 1956 to 1960, became Foreign Minister under the man who defeated him for that office, Abdirashid Ali Shermarke. Sheikh Ali Jumale, who lost the presidency to Aden A. Osman in 1960, then participated in the Shermarke government. Abdirashid Ali Shermarke himself, after being Prime Minister from 1960-64, was voted out of office, eventually left the SYL, and then came back to be elected President of the Republic in 1967.

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<sup>6</sup> Castagno, A. A. (1959) *Somalia: International Conciliation*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

<sup>7</sup> Potholm, C. P. (1970) *op. cit.*, p. 4

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205

Mohamed Ibrahim Egal participated in the 1960-62 government, went into opposition for 5 years and subsequently became Prime Minister.

After even more serious mistakes, those northern officers who staged the December 1961 mutiny at Hargeisa were jailed, but after period in prison were allowed to rejoin the army and fought against the Ethiopians. They have subsequently rejoined society and are regarded as members in good standing.<sup>10</sup>

Potholm maintains that the responsiveness of the Somali political system results in part from the maintenance of an ethos where the losers can afford to take a relaxed view of the eventual consequences of their political defeats. When deferred hopes and aspirations, not exile or imprisonment, are the result of a political loss, individual actors are far less inclined to view politics as a zero-sum game or to act in such a way as to undermine the entire system. All these characteristics help sustain the political system by increasing levels of identification with it and its leaders.

Most scholars on the Horn would agree that Somalia's principal troubles during this period were emanating from its pursuit of the 'Pan-Somali goal of unification' for all Somali-inhabited territories in the Horn of Africa.<sup>11</sup> In essence, the psychological and political boundaries of the Somali political system exceeded the territorial limits of the post-colonial state of Somalia.

The Somali Republic thus was born with a ready-made cause for serious conflict with all its neighbours as it refused to recognize the colonial borders that partitioned the Somali nation, while its neighbours, supported by a consensus among African states, upheld the status quo. The preoccupation for unification had an impact on Somalia in three ways: the economic and political neglect of the national body politic caused by the preoccupation with the 'missing territories' resulted in a complete dereliction of the national agenda; it set the stage for a close relationship between the embryonic Somali Military forces and the Soviet Union; and it 'inaugurated an ominous arms race' replete with economic and social ramifications in the region.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the peaceful professions inscribed in the constitution of the Somali Republic, it was obvious that only force could secure the goal of a Greater Somalia, and the search for weapons commenced immediately. The result was the squandering of national energies and resources on a quixotic, unrealizable objective. Somalia was simply too weak to seize territory by force from her more powerful neighbours. We went to futile wars with Ethiopia over the Ogaden, first in 1964, and more disastrously in 1977.

A change of president and a change of elected government in 1967 led to a shift of emphasis on the pan-Somali issue. Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke was elected president. He then appointed Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal to the post of premiership. The new premier sought detente with

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 206-7.

<sup>11</sup> See Lewis, I. M. (1988) *A Modern History of Somalia: Nation and State in Horn of Africa*. Westview Press; Pankhurst, E. Sylvia (1951) *Ex-Italian Somaliland*. London: Watts & Co.; Touval, Saadia (1963) *Somali Nationalism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; Markakis, John (1990) *National and Class Conflict in the Horn*. London: Zed Books Ltd.; Samatar, S. (1991) *Somalia: A Nation in Turmoil*. London: Minority Rights Group; Tripodi, Paulo (1999) *The Colonial Legacy in Somalia: Rome and Mogadishu: From Colonial Administration to Operation Restore Hope*. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

<sup>12</sup> Markakis, John (1990), op. cit.

Kenya and Ethiopia, and within few weeks relations between Somalia and its neighbours were 'radically transformed and bitter hostility was replaced by expressions of good will and by friendly cooperation.'

Despite the criticism this new policy attracted, in Somalia's last general elections of 26 March 1969 the SYL government was returned to power with increased support. Of the 123 seats, the SYL captured 73, the Socialist National Congress took 11, the Somali African National Union 6, and the HDMS (*Hisbia Destour Mustaqbil, Somali*) 3; 23 other parts won at least 1 seat. Prime Minister Egal formed the new government.<sup>13</sup>

On October 15, President Sharmarke was assassinated by a dissident policeman while on tour of northeast Somalia. Prime Minister Egal's government was overthrown by a military coup on the day after the President's funeral. Seizing power in order to combat what it termed "tribalism" and "corruption," the newly formed Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC) abolished the Constitution and all democratic structures.

In a telling postscript ending the chapter on Somalia's Political System, C. P. Potholm writes: "Although not totally unexpected the military intervention dealt the political system a shattering blow and underscored the ease with which political development may be halted or reversed, even after a decade of growth. Yet it remains our thesis that in Somalia, the democratic ethos of the society and the long tradition of polyarchal decision making will, over time, strongly influence the future course of politics no matter what its institutional framework, and should lead to the reassertion of civilian authorities in the not too distant future."<sup>14</sup>

Sadly, that hope did not materialize and the military held on to power over the next two decades. This coup, which we shall consider next, has in my view led to the complete disintegration of the Somali people and their government.

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<sup>13</sup> Potholm, C. P. (1970), op. cit., p. 228.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 229.