



What a protracted social fatigue and incompetent political elite are besetting an uncertain Somali era

By Adan Ismail
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It is written in the book of nature that nothing lasts forever and changes are as inescapable as nature itself. Problems confronting nations are responded to in two ways: the tender wisdom of statesmen or the sweeping tides of desperate masses with the consequences of each shaping the future of those nations and their societies. Where the wisdom of leadership fails and the rage of desperate masses takes charge to fill the vacuum, the result is nothing but ruins as in some countries where wisdom-deprived rigid leaders sunk their countries into the abyss. Contrastingly, many thriving nations stand on the full measure of the wisdom of past and present leaders.

Beneath the surface of the constitutional crises unfolding in Somalia and the brawl of the political elite, seismic currents of social discontent are building up underneath. Undercurrents generated by long-standing despair coupled with numerous other ills which the Somali society has been grappling with for more than three decades of statelessness. A protracted social fatigue compounded by the lack of saviours to chart a new pathway is dreading the Somali future. Four dire background conditions are particularly causing social jitters and which lately, have caused unusual social trends.

The Veering Somali Vehicle

Understanding the intricate history of Somali society and what defines their existence can be summarized in the Somali Vehicle Theory. A hypothetical four-wheeled automobile, its wheels being Islam, spacious living space, nature and anti-Ethiopianism. Islam and living space make the frontal wheels - the most cherished - while nature and the Ethiopian factor form the rear, the most hated.

The choice of these four wheels in theorizing Somali affairs is particularly significant. Of the infinite things that constitute the Somali being, individually or socially, these four remarkably stand out as the things persistently preoccupying the Somali psyche. And whose behaviour towards the society always triggers their reactions. Each of these four has a unique place in the long Somali history spanning centuries.

Islam makes the bones, flesh and blood of the Somali body irreversibly embedded in their souls. The significance of Islam in Somali life is so great that it is central to every activity and a solution to every problem. In conflicts, Islam is a sword of deterrence for the Somali people against foreign intruders beginning with the ancient wars with the Christian Ethiopian Empire and later European colonialists.

Ethiopia, which metamorphosed from the defunct Christian Abyssinian Empire, is considered a natural Somali enemy attempting to conquer them for centuries. Enmity rooted in historical faith polarization. Nature is another enemy of Somalis with its devastating impacts of drought, and diseases, impoverishing them and causing occasional clash with themselves and their neighbours. Nature which forced them to migrate has left a deep cultural imprint to make Somalis a mobile race. Irrespective of under which sovereign jurisdiction, the expansive Somali living space is considered a unique pride only possessed by Somalis in the entire Africa. The best wealth the society inherited from past generations.

While these wheels of the Somali vehicle have faced considerable danger since colonial times, the situation worsened following the collapse of the Somali state and the dissipation of a central authority that protected common interests.

The first of the frontal wheels, the Islamic religion which is the most cherished thing and the sword of deterrence has been contaminated with ruinous fractions. There came a steady permeation of numerous 'heretic' sectarian snippets that have been slowly displacing the oldest form of Islam which the society has known for more than a millennium when Somalis wholeheartedly embraced Islam. Among them is Salafism which bears a bloodletting trademark and birthed a barbarous child, Alshabaab.

Al Shabaab has proved to be the greatest disaster that ever struck the Somali people. Their transnational ideology that posits inviting all Muslims into Somalia under the guise of global Jihad sets a very unpleasant shadow of re-Islamization with the impression that no Islam exists on Somali soil. Such ideological underpinnings have reduced Somali soil into every man's territory, a battleground for foreign powers and a hideout for criminal adventurers. The very existence of Al Shabaab serves as a pretext for the influx of foreign forces whose presence, with each passing day, bleaks the Somali future.

On the domestic level, the group's operations contradict every aspect of Somali customs and the religious principles the society has known since time immemorial. Alshabaabi's indiscriminate killings flout the golden rules of Somali cultural traditions that give unquestionable immunity to specific groups in the society - women, children, elders and religious leaders. Over centuries of inter-Somali wars, these groups were designated as *Biri-mageydo* or rather, the spared ones and before Al Shabaab, has been a cardinal rule in the Somali doctrine of warfare with attempts to flout only attracting social contempt and ostracization.

Al Shabaab retards Somali society's quest for modernization. Like Boko Haram of Nigeria, it forbids secular education branding it as a 'Western tool.' Not only in Somalia but also in the Somali region of Kenya, the group has left a disastrous mark. It conducts kidnappings of teachers, torches schools, bombs educational facilities and abducts doctors and other service providers ensuring that part of the country trails behind the magical pace of Kenya's development and modernisation. In July 2022, the group launched a daring incursion into the Somali region of Ethiopia and although they were repelled by local security forces, their motive was none other than social sabotage which they are best at.

In 2017, the Somali government signed an agreement with Qatar to fund a development project to revamp the country's broken system of infrastructure. That included the construction of a modern highway connecting Mogadishu city to its surrounding towns of Afgoye and Jowhar. Alshabaab

opposed this for unknown reasons and it took nearly five years to complete the project at the cost of a large number of dead security personnel, Turkish engineers and Somali workers killed by bombings.

Worse still, the group's system of tax extortion that parallels the government's taxation system impoverishes the society and stagnates the country's economic recovery. A 2023 report by the Africa Centre For Strategic Studies has estimated an annual revenue of \$100 million extorted by Al Shabaab which compromises the country's financial system. Additionally, Alshabaab has put a generation of Somali youngsters to waste as brainwashed boys and young men forced to abandon education are used as suicide bombers, murderers, drug traffickers and cannon fodder.

Lately, as reported by Somali government officials citing evidence from captured territories, Al Shabaab went further to drive the last nail into the coffin of desecrating the Somali culture and the Islamic faith. In what is tantamount to sexual transfers and the promotion of promiscuous practices which are greatly abhorred, the group resorted to compelling men to divorce their legally married wives and then remarrying them through 'a halal marriage procedure' meaning Alshabaab does not recognize any form of Islam in Somalia that preceded them.

Orly Stern in her *Married in the Shadows* notes the 'annulling marriage' policy where non-Alshabaab men are forced to divorce wives to remarry men in their ranks. Without the consent of parents, young women and underage girls are married to their militiamen, many of these men foreigners of unknown roots. Such actions contravene the established norms of racial purity which Somalis have uniquely fought to preserve for centuries. To this date, the society abhors interracial marriage.

On the global stage, Al Shabaab has stained the society's image subjecting them to ethnic profiling everywhere. As far away as the United States where Donald Trump repeatedly slurred Somalis, a person of ethnic Somali irrespective of which part of the Horn of Africa he or she comes from gets despised because of the nasty shadow Alshabaab casts over the society.

In recent years, a spate of kidnappings and disappearances of prominent Somali individuals and ordinary people accused of connections with Al Shabaab made the news headlines in Kenya. Because of alleged connections with Alshabaab, Somali property and wealth are being preyed upon subjecting Somalis to perpetual economic stagnation. In March 2024, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned 16 Somali business networks and individuals for "lending financial backing to Al-Shabaab."

By and large, a general Somali consensus holds that Alshabaab represents the greatest menace that the Somali society and the peninsula have ever seen, worse than European colonialism. The most striking similarity between white colonialism and Al Shabaab is that both are foreign-conceived with brutish dealings. The only difference is that Al Shabaab falsely uses religion to justify this barbarism.

The second front wheel - spacious space - is also at risk of slipping away from society's hands. Covering the most expansive landmass by any single ethnic group in Africa, Somali living space transcends Somalia's national boundaries and is considered a sacred property for the whole ethnic group. This living space has however been steadily shrinking from the peripheries, especially on the Ethiopian front.

Since the early 20th century when Ethiopia annexed Somali territories with the help of the British Empire in the Anglo-Abbyssinian treaty, territories on that front have been shrinking quite fast. Subsequent Ethiopian governments have resorted to systematic depopulation in that part through the resettlement of non-Somalis. Areas which Somalis dominated are now populated by other ethnic groups mainly Oromos. For instance, the two largest cities in Eastern Ethiopia, Harar and Dire Dawa, a traditional Muslim city-state housing Somali and other Muslim Sultanates in the past centuries, have been repopulated. Part of this population engineering is also a brutal repression in that region which forces many to relocate.

Other times, Ethiopian governments initiated referendums on communal border areas leading to the incorporation of Somali territories into neighboring regions. The BBC in its “What is behind clashes in Ethiopia's Oromia and Somali regions?” has reported that a 2004 referendum along the Somali-Oromo border had seen 80% of 420 villages transferred to the Oromia region causing mass displacement of ethnic Somalis. Oromos have been encroaching on that they are only a heartbeat away from capturing the main city in the Somali region. Recently, the Afar tribe have been increasingly infringing on Somali territories with the alleged direct aid of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces.

According to displaced Somalis, ‘unseen’ hands orchestrate the Afar-Somali tensions where then the National Army intervenes, designating the area as a demilitarized zone but eventually handing it over to the other side the Afar. Shocking reports of Somali territories falling to the hands of Afars accompanied by gruesome clips of pleading evicted Somalis are being watched with very much unease everywhere in the Somali peninsula.

In the Somalia proper, Ethiopians are replicating the same strategy used with the Somali region under their control; using a flood of migrants. Waves of undocumented immigrants are massively pouring into Somalia's Northern and Eastern regions claiming to use it as a transit route to Arabia. However, on closer scrutiny, almost all of these migrants remain in those towns and cities, creating makeshift houses and carving out small settlements that can soon transform into villages and towns.

Students of history would attest that altering the demographic composition of an area through systematic migration to create ‘facts on the ground’ and later laying a claim over it is an old but still effective long-term strategy. In the 19th century, the U.S. government flooded white protestant migrants into Mexico to dilute the catholic population in Texas and ultimately claim ownership. Eventually, the US incorporated Texas after those protestants staged a violent uprising against Mexico in 1835-6, known as the Texas Revolution. Is Ethiopia playing the same playbook?

For centuries, Somalis undertook one of the most sustained migrations in Africa to deal with unforgiving nature, and the same adversary came to bite them back mercilessly. Prolonged droughts coupled with overgrazing of lands have made their regions arid and increasingly uninhabitable. Livestock which formed the society's main stock of wealth has significantly reduced due to mass deaths caused by drought and diseases. The majority of pastoralists after losing their stocks of wealth are flocking to cities, towns and villages making pastoralism die a slow death. It is estimated that 4 million Internally Displaced Persons live in Somalia in dire situations.

The aftermath of nature’s bite is mass displacement, skyrocketing poverty levels, drug usage (including Khat), high crime rate and a disgruntled population that can do anything for survival. Perhaps this explains why episodes of drug trafficking and usage and commercial sex are becoming near-daily

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activities in Somalia's urban centres. Circumstances are pushing people to break every norm and the result is nothing but the doom of broken morality. Moral decadence is a cause of systematic but painful racial disappearance.

The last wheel of the Somali vehicle is violently rolling to escalation. As an old Christian empire with a messianic mission, Ethiopia has right from the beginning, with so much hubris, denied the existence of any Somali nation. Over sixty years ago when the birth of a Somali republic was in the offing, Emperor Haile Sellasie vehemently opposed claiming Somalis are part of the great Ethiopian Empire which he so fantasized about.

Historical records show that on the eve of Somalia's independence, Imperial Ethiopia embarked on frantic efforts to convince some of the veto powers to block Somalia's accession to the United Nations. In the early 1960s, Ethiopia floated the idea to annex Djibouti, a country predominated by ethnic Somalis which was still a French colony. The 1964 Somali-Ethiopia war itself was a manifestation of Ethiopian imperial ambition to incorporate the infant Somali republic into the empire.

On a closer timeline, in 1984 when Ethiopian forces crossed to Somalia backing rebel forces trying to depose the Siad Barre regime, Addis Ababa's foreign minister Goshe Walde declared the sovereign ownership of newly captured towns of Balan Bale and Goldogob in Central Somalia (Abdisalam M. Salwe , The Collapse of Somali State, 1996) . Since the collapse of the Somali state, Ethiopia has pursued a policy of relentless military interventionism with its 2006 invasion of Southern Somalia topping the list of aggressions. Its forces under the aegis of 'peacekeeping' currently occupy large parts of Somalia and as the chief of Ethiopian Defense Force Birhanu Jula claimed in an interview in late March, his forces occupy 60% of Somalia.

In a manner characteristic of Ethiopia's constant denial of Somali statehood, Addis Ababa has on the 1st of January 2024 signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the breakaway Somaliland, sidestepping the central government in Mogadishu. Ethiopians are unlikely to ever come to terms to peacefully coexist as equals with Somalis and Somalis are more extreme in their subordination to Ethiopians. Such antagonistic relations will forever continue haunting the Horn of Africa.

As it stands, the cherished frontal wheels of the Somali vehicle are under heavy assault. Islam is assaulted by Al Shabaab and the living space by Ethiopians. This calls for concerted efforts of salvation. The rear wheels are gnawing at the society compelling them to make a move. Ethiopia is devouring the Somali nationhood bit by bit and nature is emptying the stocks of survival to impoverish the society. Cornered and desperate for relief, the signals of social crusades have been appearing since 2022.

Crumbling Status-Quo.

Ordinarily, when societies grow weary of an unresponsive establishment in the face of distress, they ask and demand answers. In a justified manner, the first barrage of questions always targets the status quo; why the stagnation? Why the failure? Should the establishment fail to respond sensibly, the ground becomes ripe for dissenting voices to take centre stage. At times, dissenting voices act reasonably while at others, unleash unmitigated rage of terror. As in the 1940s when Arab masses vented their anger on the established monarchies because that generation of Arab leaders was

castigated for inaction to prevent Israeli creation and incompetency when infant Israel defeated them in war.

Reeling from the tectonic shocks of a devastating state collapse and the subsequent lengthy period of crisis, and incensed by the three decades of stagnation of the status quo, the Somali people have in the last two years started taking matters into their own hands. It is important to note that these developments and these anti-status quo unfoldings in Somalia are independent of any ‘inciting’ factors but purely voluntary social movements engendered by prolonged dreadful conditions and the failure of the establishment to meet people’s expectations.

Northern secessionism and Southern Islamic radicalism dominated Somalia’s post-civil war political landscape. In the North, breakaway Somaliland declared independence in 1991 but with no sovereign recognition since then while in the South, successive Islamist groups of which Al Shabaab is the latest have been waging wars. A third and latecomer is the system of federalism adopted in the year 2000 as a last-ditch effort to reconstitute a new republic out of the rubbles of a devastating civil war.

The roots of Islamic radicalism in Somalia are traceable to 1975 when ten prominent religious scholars were executed on the orders of Siad Barre’s dictatorial regime over a disagreement with controversial family laws. Once his regime fell, graduates from radicalization camps of the Afghan-Soviet War, many of them veterans of the war, and other religious scholars entrenched their feet in the populous, forested and diverse Southern Somalia. The secessionism versus radicalism binary deadlocked Somalia’s politics for three continuous decades until 2022 when unusual social tides simultaneously swept the duo.

In the South, a wave of anti-Al Shabaab campaigns suddenly erupted in the Hiran region in Central Somalia in mid-2022. Among other long-standing grievances of killings, cultural desecration, contravention of Islamic norms and forced taxation, the proximate cause of this rage explosion was after Alshabaab burned huge properties owned by one clan they accused of defying their orders and in the process, killing dozens including women and children. In response, bells of danger were sounded, thousands of clan warriors volunteered and in ways reminiscent of ancient times, clan elders commandeered the campaign, some prominent ones dying in the frontlines. Bitter fighting raging for months culminated in the Hawaadle family clan single-handedly routing out Alshabaab from their territory.

If the Cold War “Domino Theory” was a justification for the Vietnam War by the capitalist camp, Somali culture has a slightly related version of it. When a common problem is dealt with by one section of the society or a clan, it becomes an almost undeclared code of honour and an open challenge for the rest to complete the puzzle, setting off a successive chain of events.

In this case, what started as a one-clan resistance morphed into all-out clan-led campaigns in Hirshabeele and Galmudug states, an encouraging development that endeared the central government and its allies to join the war. In less than a year, Alshabaab were driven out of their main strongholds, huge territories recovered and the group for the first time was put on defensive mode. This crushing blow took many observers by surprise because ill-equipped and poorly trained clan warriors achieved in a short duration what the Somali National Army, African Union forces and international backers failed to do in more than a decade.

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In the North, similar events started unfolding in December of 2022. Despite their incongruous ideologies - secularism in the North and Islamic radicalism in the South - there is little or no difference in the modus operandi of the breakaway Somaliland and Alshabaab to prolong their lifespan. Both employ a system of intimidation, disinformation, assassinations and systematic sabotage.

In the Eastern part of the self-declared Republic of Somaliland where the unionist Dhulbahante family clan reside, assassinations have been rampant after Somaliland established a firm footing in that area in 2007 after capturing the main town of LasAnod and enacted an economic stranglehold. What followed were 15 years of oppressive rule characterized by suppression and widespread assassinations. However, the assassination of a prominent local politician eventually marked the final spark of the tinder box. The town's youth took to the streets to confront the security forces who responded with iron fists.

The result was clan elders taking the lead, condemning secessionism and issuing a declaration of reunion with Somalia. Nine months of bloody battles in which Somaliland indiscriminately shelled the town ended the latter's routing on 25 August 2023, a spectacular scene in which citizen journalism played a critical role. The dream of a sovereign state which was entertained for so long has since then turned into a mist. The undeclared code of honour at play in the South which turned many clans against Al Shabaab is also inaction in Somaliland as more clans prepare to withdraw from the entity. Quite possibly, a disorderly reunion with Mogadishu or complete disintegration seems to be the fate of Somaliland.

In light of the brewing tensions caused by the MoU, the third pillar of the Status Quo - federalism - is expected to face a public backlash. Since January 1st 2024, as the central government undertook extreme diplomatic measures to contain Ethiopia, the federal member states kept mum, much to the consternation of the Somali public. Being in cahoots with Ethiopia in this Sea access drama for the case of Somaliland, and the silence of the rest or even their potential opposition to the central government's efforts to build a solid alliance may mark the watershed moment that could throw a shaky federal system into crisis.

Somalia's federal system which was envisaged to decentralize power and enhance equitable share of the national cake, has reduced the country into a loose patchwork of clan fiefdoms with incompetent tribal buffoons sitting at the helm. A system that instead of responding to the needs of its subjects only increased their woes. Cracks that could lead to the demise of Somalia's federalism are already appearing in the Hirshabeele state.

What does the Somali future look like?

The latest social trends instigated by the veering vehicle and the absence of a common hope point that the Somali society is voluntarily readying to move into a new era to relieve itself. Moments like this, it is woefully misinforming to view society from the lens of rivalling units such as secessionists, unionists, federal states or even individual politicians. Hierarchically, the society is arranged in a pyramid-like where at the bottom, the unshakable will of the silent majority lies. A will that transcends national boundaries and is unaffiliated to any specific unit. Such a will is what makes a Somali nomad in Northern Kenya fume with rage when a fellow Somali is knocked to death by Ethiopian security forces or, a Somali territory falls to marauding Ethiopians. In the end, it is this common Somali will that defines the future of this part of Africa.

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Normally, when this silent majority is shaken, surprising developments happen such as the current crumble of the status quo. In the realism of opinion, analysts derive their conclusions based on a deceiving surface and when the seismic undercurrent explodes to the obliviousness of the surface, and eventually burns the surface, they call it a 'surprising development.' It is therefore so misleading to derive conclusions about the next Somali era from the dealings of a few men at the surface donning suits. Or the sayings of ill-will foreigners.

A newly emerging issue that could define the Somali future is the phenomena of generational collision that stood out both in the South and North developments. There is a clash between the current established political class and charged newcomers rising from the ruins of the civil war. A general public antipathy towards Somalia's established political elite reigns as expressed in these tectonic movements where this generation at the top who only got there not by merit but by the favours of a failed system are facing the wrath of a new generation born in the tempest of the civil war.

In the South, the anti-Al Shabaab campaign was spearheaded by youth calling themselves *macawiisleeey* bearing semblance with the Bushwhackers of the United States during the Civil War. The success of this campaign in its initial stages when politicians were not involved shows the energy and the vigour of this generation to bring about a change. More surprising is even how long-established norms such as kinship ties are susceptible to being swept aside by a defiant and rebellious generation. During the Hawaadle campaign against Al Shabaab, new rules were enacted to ostracize clan members who sided with the group permitting their murder on the spot without the slightest consideration of blood kinship. This gave the campaign a stunning success unlike anywhere else in the subsequent episodes.

When the war spread and politicians jumped into the mix 'to accelerate' the fight against Al Shabaab, donning military gear and joining their clans, the campaign ironically faltered. It remains a mystery how the flames of a social inferno that came so close to ending the menace of terrorism in Somalia culminated in a terrible failure at the watchful eye of those entrusted with the duty. Al Shabaab is now making a steady comeback to regain the territories it has lost to public onslaught. This failure only proves right the suspicions of many of Somalia's post-civil war generation that the established political elite are deliberately prolonging the country's woes to maintain relevance and the same can be said about the aging and sickly Al Shabaab leaders.

In the LasAnod uprising, this new generation driving the winds of change called themselves *Jamahir* a derivative of the Arabic word 'Jamhur' or rather the masses which is a terminology depicting revolutionary sentiments. It translates to the will of the masses. Here also, some old social norms were altered. Instead of blindly following the dictations of the clan elders, as it used to be, these youngsters proved to be rational sheriffs. Rather than submit to the tyranny of elders, they have been monitoring their moves so they do not deviate from the common cause. It got to the point where clan elders were openly threatened with elimination should they not comply with the common cause.

Equally, the involvement of politicians in this undertaking was zeroed casting them as dishonest and complicit in societal woes. This name *jamahir* itself could mean that revolutionary fervour is high among Somalia's post-civil war generation. The name has so far gained prominence in the Somali social space; it is being replicated in other places whenever there is discontent meaning that it has transcended boundaries to become a new doctrine of wider social movement.

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There is a resurgence of Sufi Islam in Somalia. Somali Sufis who are known for their humbleness, and submission to the laws of the land and not power seekers are themselves waking up to the prolonged turbulence. Sufi resurgence can be attributed to the tragic legacies of Salafism whose shadow Al Shabaab exists. Despite their tenderness in spirit, Somali Sufis are very brutal in warfare and this was proved by the annihilation of Al Shabaab units in Central Somalia after numerous raids on Sufi camps. Lately, Somali Sufi scholars have been holding religious gatherings frequently preaching about societal ills that need remedying.

In the North of the country where the LasAnod uprising took place, the whole scenario represented the rebirth of a 20th-century Darawish Movement; an anti-colonial Sufi Salihya led by the proto-nationalist and the poetic genius Sayid Muhammad Abdille Hassan. It was seen 'Jamahir' donning Sayid's famous white turban, mimicking his style, reciting and repeatedly referencing his rich poetry to stoke up nationalist and religious sentiments and at the same time justify their war against secessionist Somaliland. The Dhulbahante family clan who unceremoniously drove out Somaliland have a rich history of revolutionary and religious fervour and their revival alone could mark the dawn of a new era in the Somali peninsula.

Whether a fragmented society will turn against each other along clan lines, or Somalis engaging bloody encounters with Ethiopians, enough signals can be caught to tell pregnant clouds have gathered over Somalia and the peninsula. If not for these grim situations, a charismatic revolutionary figure may spawn anywhere in Somalia or the Somali peninsula and command an earth-moving public rally. In any case, the Somali ground is ripe for a reshuffle and so much uncertainty looms large over the distant horizon.

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