



The Problem Is Deeper Still: Somalia's Crisis of Political Character and Adverse Selection

A Rejoinder to “Much Worship, Little Morality” and “The Problem Is Not a Lack of Worship—It Is the Absence of Accountability”

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The recent exchange between [Dr Abdurahman Baadiyow](#) and [Dayib Sh. Ahmed](#) raises one of the most consequential questions Somalis can ask themselves after more than three decades of state collapse, conflict, fragmentation and repeated attempts at reconstruction: why, after everything we have endured and everything we have tried, do we continue returning to substantially the same political difficulties? Baadiyow begins with a disturbing paradox. Somalia is an overwhelmingly Muslim society in which religious observance remains highly visible, yet the moral consequences one might reasonably expect from that devotion—honesty, justice, compassion, restraint, trustworthiness and concern for the common good—are frequently difficult to discern in public and political life. His question, “What is wrong with us?”, therefore directs attention towards the gulf between worship and moral character. Somalia, he argues, requires leaders whose faith produces morality, whose morality produces integrity, whose integrity produces trust, and whose trust ultimately helps build functioning institutions.

Dayib Ahmed's rejoinder moves the discussion in another important direction. Perhaps, he suggests, the question should not merely be “What is wrong with us?” but “What happened to us?” Decades of violence, displacement, institutional collapse, unresolved grievances and impunity cannot simply be removed from the explanation of contemporary Somali behaviour. Nor can the country's difficulties be reduced to deficiencies of individual morality. Somalia requires accountability, reconciliation, enforceable laws and institutions capable of restraining the abuse of power. A functioning state cannot depend upon the fortunate accident that whoever occupies public office happens to be a good person. Dayib therefore moves the argument from personal morality towards the structures surrounding power: how leaders are chosen, what constrains them, what consequences follow misconduct, and how institutions can prevent the weaknesses of individuals from becoming weaknesses of the state.

There is considerable truth in both arguments, and I see little reason to choose between them. But perhaps there is another question sitting somewhere between Baadiyow's concern with character and Dayib's concern with accountability and institutions. What if Somalia's prolonged catastrophe has produced a political environment that does not merely tolerate destructive human traits but, in important respects, selects for, rewards and reproduces them? What if part of our difficulty is not simply that destructive people sometimes reach positions of authority, but that the rules—formal and informal—governing our competition for power have gradually made certain destructive characteristics politically advantageous? If that possibility has merit, then the Somali predicament may involve something deeper than either individual moral failure or institutional weakness considered separately. It may involve a relationship between character, political selection and institutions, each continuously reinforcing the others.

What Has Our History Been Rewarding?

I would hesitate to conclude that there is something inherently wrong with Somalis. Greed, arrogance, envy, hatred, dishonesty, prejudice, fear, insecurity and lust for power are not Somali inventions. They belong to the human condition. Every society contains people capable of generosity and greed, humility and arrogance, compassion and cruelty, honesty and deceit, restraint and domination. The useful comparative question is therefore not whether these destructive characteristics exist among Somalis—they obviously do, just as they exist everywhere else—but what our historical and political environment has done with them. Which characteristics have helped people survive, accumulate influence, capture resources, defeat competitors and acquire political office? Conversely, what has happened to those exhibiting restraint, fairness, humility, tolerance and an unwillingness to manipulate communal identities for political advantage?

Somalia's recent history has exposed successive generations to dictatorship, state collapse, civil war, displacement, militia rule, violent extremism, poverty, institutional weakness, political fragmentation and fierce competition over resources and public office. It would be extraordinary if decades of such experiences had left political behaviour untouched. Under prolonged conditions of insecurity, behaviours that are socially destructive over the long term may nevertheless become individually rational over the short term. Suspicion may appear safer than trust. Kinship solidarity may offer greater immediate protection than abstract citizenship. Political aggression may outperform compromise. Patronage may secure loyalty more rapidly than impartial administration. Ruthlessness may defeat restraint. Manipulation may defeat honesty. Accumulating power may appear safer than surrendering it. What begins as adaptation to insecurity can gradually become habit; what becomes habitual can acquire social legitimacy; and what acquires legitimacy can eventually become embedded in political practice. At that point we are confronting something more complicated than individual moral failure. We are confronting a selection problem.

Every political system selects. It determines, formally and informally, what kinds of people are attracted to public office, which behaviours help them reach it, which behaviours enable them to remain there, and what happens to people who refuse to play according to those rules.

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Suppose a political marketplace disproportionately rewards lust for power, domination, unrestrained ambition, corruption, exploitation, narcissism, contempt, vindictiveness, deceit, tribal mobilisation and intolerance. What kinds of personalities will gradually become overrepresented within that marketplace? And what happens to someone displaying the opposite characteristics—service-mindedness, respect for autonomy, disciplined ambition, integrity, fairness, humility, empathy, mercy, truthfulness, solidarity and tolerance? The uncomfortable possibility is that the second person may be morally better equipped to govern Somalia while being politically less equipped to capture power within the system Somalia has created. This is what I would describe as adverse political selection.

The danger is that such selection can become self-reinforcing. Weak institutions encourage destructive political competition; destructive political competition rewards those most capable of succeeding within it; those who succeed may then manipulate or further weaken institutions to preserve their advantage; weakened institutions deepen insecurity and distrust; insecurity increases dependence upon clan, factional and personal networks; and those networks further obstruct the development of impartial institutions. Around the circle we go. Greed becomes the accumulation of public resources. Lust for power becomes an inability to imagine political life outside office. Domination becomes exclusion. Unrestrained ambition becomes willingness to bend institutions towards personal survival. Corruption becomes patronage. Tribalism becomes a technology of political mobilisation. Suspicion becomes strategy. Dishonesty becomes tactical communication. Vindictiveness becomes the punishment of opponents. These are no longer merely private defects of character. Once combined with political authority, they become institutional forces.

This is why political character matters so profoundly. Power is a multiplier of character. The arrogance of a private citizen may damage a handful of relationships; the arrogance of a president may affect appointments, constitutional arrangements, security policy and national reconciliation. An ordinary person's greed has limited reach; the greed of someone controlling substantial public resources can impoverish thousands. A citizen's prejudice is morally objectionable; the prejudice of somebody controlling the machinery of government can reshape the state itself. Consequently, the question of character cannot simply be dismissed as moral sermonising. Nor, however, can character substitute for institutions. The challenge is to understand how the two interact.

Why Leadership Must Be the Immediate Point of Intervention

If destructive tendencies have become widespread across society, there is very little that can realistically be done to transform an entire population in the short term. Moral and cultural transformation is generational work. Somalia cannot postpone state-building until millions of citizens have undergone some collective moral reformation. The immediate intervention must therefore occur where individual behaviour has the greatest multiplier effect: among the political elite and those entrusted with public authority. This does not absolve ordinary citizens.

Citizens themselves reproduce destructive politics whenever they condemn corruption by an opponent but defend it when committed by a clansman, excuse injustice when their side benefits from it, reward inflammatory rhetoric, or demand privileges they would condemn if enjoyed by others. Dayib is entirely right to insist that political double standards among citizens form part of the problem. But responsibility and political leverage are not distributed equally. The conduct of somebody controlling a ministry, security force, public budget or presidency has consequences fundamentally different in scale from those of an ordinary citizen. The political elite must therefore become the first practical point of intervention, even while the longer work of societal transformation continues.

The immediate challenge is to identify, cultivate and elevate the comparatively small cohort of Somalis in whom constructive political characteristics demonstrably predominate over destructive ones. Yet even this proposition requires considerable care. It is tempting to say that Somalia simply requires a new generation of educated and civilised leaders. Education is indispensable, but education alone is nowhere near sufficient. An educated narcissist remains a narcissist. An intelligent corrupt official may simply become more sophisticated at corruption. A highly educated authoritarian may possess greater capacity to manipulate institutions than an uneducated one. Knowledge increases capability; it does not determine the moral purpose towards which that capability will be directed. Consequently, the leaders Somalia requires cannot be assessed merely by academic qualifications, eloquence, international experience, technical expertise, wealth or clan acceptability. They must also be assessed by demonstrated character, particularly under conditions of temptation, disagreement and pressure.

The questions we ask prospective leaders must therefore become more searching. Can this person lose an election and accept the result? Can he relinquish office when his lawful mandate ends? Can she appoint somebody more capable than herself? Can he tolerate criticism without treating the critic as an enemy? Can she protect the rights of people outside her own community? Can he refuse money or advantage to which he is not entitled? Can she compromise without interpreting compromise as humiliation? Can he obey a constitutional provision that frustrates his immediate political ambition? Can she distinguish the resources of the republic from the resources of those temporarily governing it? Above all, can a leader place an institution above himself? These are not secondary questions to be considered after qualifications and political connections. In a country trying to reconstruct constitutional government after catastrophic state failure, they may be among the most important qualifications for public office.

Nor can we simply count somebody's constructive and destructive characteristics as though moral character were arithmetic. A leader might possess ten admirable qualities and one catastrophic vice.

Someone may be intelligent, generous, courageous, personally compassionate and genuinely patriotic while possessing an overwhelming lust for power. Once entrusted with the presidency, that single characteristic may eventually overwhelm everything else. The relevant test is therefore not merely whether somebody possesses more virtues than vices.

Somalia must identify leaders in whom constructive characteristics broadly predominate while screening especially rigorously for destructive traits that become dangerous when multiplied by political power: lust for power, domination, corruption, exploitation, narcissism, contempt, vindictiveness, ruthlessness, deceit, tribalism, intolerance and dehumanisation. Their constructive opposites—service, respect for autonomy, disciplined ambition, integrity, justice, humility, empathy, mercy, truthfulness, solidarity, tolerance and recognition of human dignity—must be understood not simply as admirable private virtues, but as state-building qualities.

Good Leaders Are Necessary, but They Are Not Enough

Here the institutional argument in Dayib's rejoinder becomes indispensable. Imagine that Somalia could somehow identify one hundred exceptionally principled, competent and public-spirited men and women tomorrow. Imagine that we were reasonably satisfied that these people possessed integrity, restraint, tolerance, compassion and a genuine commitment to public service. Now place them inside a political environment in which survival depends heavily upon patronage, clan mobilisation, opaque money, personal networks and perpetual manoeuvring. What happens to them? Some will lose. Some will withdraw in disgust. Some will be marginalised. And some will adapt. The tragedy is that adaptation may gradually mean acquiring precisely the destructive behaviours for which we rejected their predecessors. The lesson is therefore unavoidable: good leaders without good institutions are vulnerable, but good institutions without sufficiently good leaders are vulnerable too. Somalia ultimately requires both.

This is also where Baadiyow and Dayib's apparently different emphases begin to converge. Baadiyow is right that institutions cannot ultimately be divorced from character: institutions are created, staffed, interpreted and defended by human beings. Dayib is equally right that personal virtue cannot substitute for institutional accountability: a functioning state must not depend upon the hope that everyone entrusted with power will voluntarily behave well. Perhaps the mistake is to imagine that Somalia must choose between moral renewal and institutional reconstruction. Character shapes institutions; institutions shape incentives; incentives shape behaviour; behaviour gradually shapes political culture; political culture influences whom society entrusts with power; and those leaders in turn reshape institutions. Somalia's tragedy is that this feedback mechanism has too often operated destructively. Somalia's recovery requires turning that mechanism in the opposite direction.

What, Then, Is to Be Done?

If this diagnosis is approximately correct, Somalia requires different interventions over three different horizons. In the short term, the priority must be to select better leaders while constraining power. Political recruitment should deliberately privilege demonstrated integrity, restraint, competence, tolerance, independence of judgement and constitutional temperament. But even the most admirable person must operate within enforceable constraints. Term limits, transparent procurement, independent auditing, parliamentary scrutiny, conflict-of-interest rules, credible courts, professional civil services and genuinely independent electoral and oversight institutions should not be regarded as expressions of distrust towards good leaders. They are protections against the weaknesses inherent in all human beings. The governing principle should therefore be simple: find better people, but design government on the assumption that even good people can become dangerous when power ceases to be constrained.

In the medium term, Somalia must change what political behaviour pays. Corruption must become more likely to end a career than finance one. Constitutional restraint must enhance political legitimacy rather than signal weakness. Losing an election must cease to mean personal or communal catastrophe. Political opposition must cease to mean enmity. Public employment must increasingly reward competence rather than kinship. Truthfulness must cease to be politically suicidal, and compromise must cease to be interpreted as surrender. This is where the problem moves beyond exhortation. It is not sufficient to preach honesty to politicians while maintaining a system in which dishonesty succeeds. It is not sufficient to preach national solidarity while political advancement continues to depend upon communal mobilisation. It is not sufficient to praise constitutionalism while those who disregard constitutional restraints repeatedly gain advantage from doing so. The objective must therefore be to re-engineer political incentives so that constructive behaviour increasingly becomes the rational as well as the moral choice.

In the long term, Somalia requires cultural transformation. Families, schools, universities, mosques, religious scholars, civic organisations, literature, media and public institutions must all participate in cultivating the qualities without which republican government cannot survive: integrity rather than corruption, humility rather than arrogance, solidarity rather than tribalism, mercy rather than vindictiveness, truth rather than deceit, tolerance rather than bigotry, courage rather than fear, and compassion rather than indifference. This work cannot be accomplished by decree and may require generations. Yet there is an important reason for optimism, because the relationship between character and institutions runs in both directions. We commonly imagine that virtuous citizens create good institutions, but good institutions can also help create more constructive citizens.

Imagine a Somali child growing up in a society where police officers generally apply laws impartially, courts resolve disputes fairly, presidents leave office peacefully, public money is transparently accounted for, political opponents disagree without trying to destroy one another, government employment is substantially determined by merit, and citizens from different communities cooperate routinely inside institutions they all regard as belonging to them.

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That child learns a profoundly different lesson about human relationships from a child growing up where survival appears to depend upon suspicion, patronage, force and kinship protection. Institutions do more than administer society; they teach society what behaviour works. A corrupt state teaches corruption. An arbitrary state teaches insecurity. A tribalised state teaches tribalism. But a fair state teaches trust; a constitutional state teaches restraint; an accountable state teaches responsibility; and an inclusive state gradually teaches citizenship.

The Search Is Not for Saints

None of this requires us to fantasise about morally perfect Somali leaders. Such people do not exist in Somalia because they do not exist anywhere. Nor should this argument become another variation of the "great leader" theory—the perennial hope that one extraordinary individual will somehow appear and rescue the nation through personal virtue. The objective is considerably more realistic and, I believe, considerably more profound. Somalia needs a political system capable of identifying comparatively decent and competent leaders, rewarding their constructive characteristics, constraining their destructive ones, and preventing the destructive characteristics of any one individual from becoming the destiny of an entire nation. Such a conception begins with character but does not end there. It values morality without relying upon morality alone. It demands institutions without pretending that institutions operate independently of the people who control them. And it recognises perhaps the hardest truth in this entire discussion: political systems eventually produce, or at least disproportionately elevate, the kinds of leaders they reward.

The ultimate task, therefore, is not to create a Somalia miraculously emptied of greed, arrogance, envy, tribalism, fear, resentment or lust for power. No human society has ever achieved such a condition. The attainable objective is to create a Somalia in which these characteristics no longer offer a comparative advantage in the competition for political power. In the short term, that means identifying better leaders and constraining them. In the medium term, it means changing the incentives through which political success is achieved. In the long term, it means cultivating citizens, social norms and institutions that increasingly reward integrity, justice, restraint, solidarity and service. The transformation will therefore have to occur simultaneously, though at different speeds, within the individual, the political elite, the institutions of government and eventually the wider political culture.

Baadiyow asks whether our worship has transformed us. Dayib asks what happened to us and where accountability went. Both are indispensable questions. But perhaps a third must now be added: what have the political arrangements we created—or allowed to emerge—been selecting for? If, over several decades, our political environment has rewarded many of the very human characteristics least compatible with peaceful, constitutional and accountable government, then the task ahead becomes clearer. We must change not only who governs, and not only the institutions through which they govern, but ultimately the qualities and behaviours that make somebody successful in the struggle to govern.

Only then can the vicious circle begin to turn in the opposite direction. Only then can character reinforce institutions rather than undermine them, institutions reward constructive behaviour rather than destructive behaviour, and political success cease to belong disproportionately to those most willing to exploit our weaknesses. And only then might constructive leadership cease to be an occasional Somali exception and gradually become what the Somali political system itself demands.

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