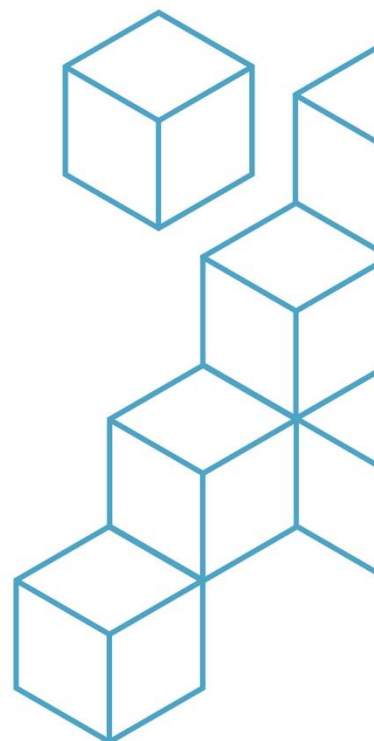


ANALYSES

The Ebbs and Flows of Somali Nationalism

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Pan-Somali nationalism will remain a potent force for as long as the Somali nation remains divided.

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On New Year's Day 2024, the prime minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, signed a memorandum of understanding with the president of the self-declared Republic of Somaliland, Muse Bihi, in which the latter agreed to lease for 50 years a 20-kilometre stretch of coastal land to be used by the former for a naval base. This triggered a groundswell of Somali nationalism, from Ras Kamboni to Zeila, which Abukar Arman, a renowned Somali intellectual, aptly termed in a recent article as “flames of outrage among Somali nationalists everywhere”. [\(1\)](#)

In his seminal work, *Somali Nationalism: International Politics and the Drive for Unity in the Horn of Africa* (published in 1963), Saadia Touval, a prominent American political scientist, asserted that Somali nationalism was ingrained in the psyche of the Somali, regardless of which part of the Somali peninsula one lived. [\(2\)](#) Beyond the sharing of basic identity markers such as language, religion, ethnicity, history and geography, he argued that Somali nationalism stemmed from a strong and widely shared sense of belonging to a nation that is unique among the Africans.

Touval was writing in the heyday of Somali nationalism, just a few years after two of the five colonially carved-out Somali territories gained independence in 1960. Since then, the trajectory of Somali nationalism took different turns and twists. In this article, I set out to provide a synopsis of the peaks and valleys which Somali nationalism came through, prior to and since independence.

Nationalism, broadly defined as the prevalence of devotion and loyalty to an ethnically delineated nation-state above the interests of other sub-groupings, was initially an ethno-European concept. It is

traced, in its modern form, to the American and French Revolutions in the 18th century, and gained currency in Africa – and for that matter, other colonised communities such as those in Asia and Latin America – in the early 20th century.

In the case of the Somali nation, scholars generally agree that its first manifestation appeared at the beginning of the 20th century in the Dervish Movement led by Sayid Mohamed Abdille Hassan. I. M. Lewis, the pre-eminent western scholar on Somali studies, called it a proto-nationalism, due to the fact that the Dervish struggle was as much a religious war as it was a nationalist one. [\(3\)](#)

The more modern form of Somali nationalism emerged during and in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. In the early 1940s, the Somali Youth Club (SYC), later to be renamed the Somali Youth League (SYL), was established in Mogadishu by a 13-member team of urban colonial civil servants. At about the same time, the Somali National League (SNL) was also created in Hargeisa in the then-British Somaliland. The leadership provided by that crop of young nationalists resulted in the independence of the nation and the unification of Italian Somaliland and British Somaliland in 1960.

The attainment of independence and the subsequent establishment of the Somali state led, ironically, to a period of internal fragmentation and political fissures stemming from the absence of external threats and the fighting of various interest groups – sometimes exploiting clan kinships – over the limited resources and opportunities in the nascent state. Corruption set in and spread rapidly within the state system. The system inherited from the colonial masters encouraged a culture of elite capture and corruption. The upshot of this course has been the loss, in the process, of the two overarching goals of Somali nationalism, namely reining in clannism and the quest for the realisation of the Greater Somalia dream. This created the pretext for the military coup in 1969 led by General Mohamed Siad Barre.

Somali nationalism was imbued with new energy in 1977 when the Ogaden war with Ethiopia erupted. It is not an exaggeration to say that Somali nationalism reached its peak at that time, as all Somalis took part in one way or another in that war. The defeat which the Somali army suffered at the end of the war led to the weakening of not only the state, but also the nationalistic bonds of the Somali society.

Somali nationalism faltered, or even went into a coma, when the civil war erupted in the late 1980s. In this respect, in a book chapter published in 2006, Peter Schraeder of Loyola University in Chicago, wrote off pan-Somali nationalism as dead. At the time, he seemed borne out by the unfolding events and the reality on the ground. Apart from fleeting flickers of nationalistic fervour— such as during the brief struggle of the Union of Islamic Courts in Mogadishu against the occupying Ethiopian forces— the country (and its nationalism, for that matter) dissipated into small fiefdoms, resulting in narrow clan-chauvinistic sub-nationalisms.

The Abiy-Muse MOU stirred up the hornet's nest, provoking mass protests in cities and towns across the country including Borama, Burao and Mogadishu. The timing of this development is certainly not an auspicious one, given the concerted efforts on the part of the Federal Government of Somalia to defeat Al-Shabab. Nevertheless, it may be a blessing in disguise that could have pleasant unintended consequences. It comes on the heels of converging transformations, both positive and negative, in the South and in Somaliland. The Federal Government achieved several important milestones. First, the arms embargo that was imposed on the country in 1992 was lifted in the closing months of 2023. This will enable the Government to equip its national defence forces with proper military hardware (assuming it will afford to do so). Second, the debt relief process that started many years back came to its conclusion on 13 December 2023, wiping off over 90% of Somalia's official bilateral and multilateral debt. Third, Somalia joined the regional economic block, the East African Community, paving the way for the Somali business community to enjoy a plethora of commercial privileges. These developments have converged to mould a positive sentiment among the Somali population, rekindling the long-lost patriotic pride and a nationalistic nostalgia of a bygone era.

In Somaliland, there was a gradual realisation that recognition was out of reach without the blessing of southern Somalia. More importantly, the Las Anod fiasco threw a spanner in the works of the quest for independence. The recognition project was predicated on the argument that Somaliland is reclaiming its independence, which it surrendered through the merger with the former Italian Somaliland in 1960. The most crucial plank of this argument is the borders of pre-independence British Somaliland, of which the peripheral regions of Sool, Sanag and Ayn are important. With these areas beyond the pale for the Hargeisa Administration, the prospects for recognition have greatly dimmed, thereby making the alternative (i.e. unity) a more realistic eventuality, even if it is not desired among the political elite in the North.

Nationalism thrives on external threats that are perceived to endanger the nation or a part of it. The bedrock of Somali nationalism has been the historical grievances emanating from the colonial division of the country and the consequences of it. More specifically, Ethiopia and Kenya outlasted, as sources of a perceived existential threat, the colonial project in keeping the Somali population divided. To the contrary, for Kenya and Ethiopia, this constitutes a clear case of irredentism, providing the pretext for the two countries to collude in sabotaging efforts to re-establish a strong central government in Somalia. Ken Opalo, a Kenyan academic, asserted in a recent blog post that "like Ethiopia, Kenya would likely not mind helping along a dismemberment of Somalia." [\(4\)](#) This is consistent with the historical alliance between Addis Ababa and Nairobi through their "defence pact" against Somalia, which was first signed in 1964 and has since been renewed multiple times, even after the collapse of the Somali state.

Taking the primordialist view of nationalism and coupled with the enduring reality of the partition of the Somali-inhabited territories by the European and African colonial imperial powers, pan-Somali

nationalism will remain a potent force for as long as the Somali nation remains divided. If, in the mid to late 20th century, the casus belli of Somali nationalism, with both Ethiopia and Kenya, was territorial claims and counterclaims, the stimulus for patriotic agitation is now sea-related. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in favour of Somalia in October 2021 in the maritime delimitation case between Nairobi and Mogadishu. Although Somalia lost a sliver of the disputed seawaters, the decision was received in Somalia with jubilation. But Kenya rejected it, making it an outstanding bone of contention that may rear its ugly head at any time in the future to create tensions between the two countries. Similarly, the recent signing of the MOU between Ethiopia and Somaliland, without the acquiescence of the Federal Government of Somalia, is a new source of friction that will serve as a fodder for pan-Somali nationalism.

Kenya and Ethiopia should handle the Somalia file with care for their own good. There are Somali communities with considerable economic prowess and political influence in both countries. They are also quite aware of their Somali roots. For instance, Adan Duale, the former Majority Leader in the Kenyan Parliament and the current defence minister, never minces words when it comes to his Somali and Muslim identities, though he remains a proud Kenyan. [\(5\)](#) Similarly, Mustafa Omer, the president of the Somali State in Ethiopia, was known to have been an ardent pan-Somali activist, even though he toned down his nationalistic rhetoric after his ascendance to power in Jigjiga and sometimes plays the card of an Ethiopianist for obvious political reasons.

Moreover, the rich Somali business community that is largely based in Eastleigh in Nairobi has a great deal of commercial weight in the Kenyan economy. In Ethiopia, the second biggest state in terms of size with the third largest population in the country is the Somali regional state. More importantly, the Somali diaspora in the West and in the Gulf States is quite powerful.

An action that unites all the above forces, which are currently not organized coherently, may reinvigorate pan-Somali nationalism, which can be a thorn in the side of both countries. It is therefore imperative that Ethiopia and Kenya deal with Somalia in a fair manner and avoid giving the impression that they are taking advantage of Somalia's current misfortunes, as Opalo mentioned. [\(6\)](#) At any rate, in a future conflict, Somalia has got the least to lose, given its already broken state of affairs. In a nutshell, Somali nationalism has suffered a fatal blow from the wounds of the civil war and the resultant collapse of the central state system. It may now be revived, inadvertently, by the actions of Ethiopia and, to a lesser extent, Kenya.

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