SOMALIA:
A NATION IN TURMOIL, NO MORE?

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There is usually little noteworthy in the simple fact that a Parliament has summed up to begin its work. Political analyses, in fact, tend to focus on both the formation and the shifting of alliances or on outcomes such as laws and their effect. However, we should not take such developments for granted, in particular if we are talking about Somalia, a country where a parliamentary session had not been held for over a decade now. It is, therefore, obvious that the meetings which took place since February 26th did represent a remarkable turning point.

What had made such a major change possible was the signature – on January 5th – of the Aden declaration by both Somalia’s President, Mr Abdulahi Yusuf Ahmed, and his major rival then, Mr Sharif Hassan Sheikh Aden, Speaker of the Transitional Federal Parliament. The agreement allowed the already existing Parliament – which was holding its meetings in Nairobi since its creation in late 2003 – to come back to Somalia. Observers, astonished by both the nature and the speed of change in the relations between these two leaders, had been referring to the Declaration as the long-awaited and fundamental step forward in the process leading up to national reconciliation. Still, the agreement – which did not include provisions on many major issues concerned – fell short in meeting the broad expectations it had awoken. Neither the Government nor the Parliament could resettle in Mogadishu, thus not being able to give the appropriate shape to widespread and general hopes of national reconciliation.

A negotiated arrangement had seen the latter finally find its place in the central town of Baidoa, ninety kilometres north of Mogadishu, while the President remained in his Jowhar stronghold. The capital was still plagued by furious clashes between rival warlords before finally falling to the Union of the Islamic Courts, which relegated both governmental and presidential forces further away toward Ethiopia, weakening “on the field” its role in Somali politics.

Current skirmishes between the Transitional Federal Government and the Conservative Council of the Islamic Courts show how both parties are unwilling – at this stage – to share the little remnants of State power in Somalia; they also reflect swinging international support. This paper aims at shedding light on both the main difficulties still to be faced by the Reconciliation Process and on possible future developments.
Historical background

Somalia almost doubles Italy in size and is slightly smaller than Texas. It shares over two thousands kilometres of borders with Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya and has a coastline of more than three thousand kilometres. Somalia’s population – despite figures not having been updated and having been complicated by irregular movements across borders, in response to famine and warfare – should consist of eight-ten million people, 98% of which Sunni Muslims. Somalis are all part of a single ethnical group, although bitterly divided along clan lines. Somalia has suffered from a number of diseases, all of which continue to both strike across the nation and produce severe effects. An historical perspective may help explain its most relevant – from a geopolitical point of view: the absence of a stable and common background.

Independence and external influence

During the Second World War, Italy gave up on the colonial rule it had established across the Horn of Africa, as Britain gradually substituted Italian presence. No resilient link remained between such so-called former Oriental Italian Africa and its political elites: Italy had neither the financial nor the technical resources in order to establish such ties. In the end, Rome even lacked an adequate amount of time. The Horn was thus left to the winners and to the winning factions, in Somalia notably to the Somali Youth League (SYL).

The Peace Treaty signed on February 10th, 1947 lacked formal provisions concerning the status of those colonies that had been conquered during the pre-fascist era. Cold war disputes ended with the creation, in 1950, of a UN trusteeship for Somalia, assigned to Italy. The former colonial power was charged with helping establish (as of 1960) an independent State, whose inception came after the reunion of former British and Italian Somaliland, on July 1st, 1960. Such step posed another obstacle on the way to a common background, as it added regional rivalries to already clan-based relations.

Italian post-war foreign policy in the Horn of Africa aimed at preventing hostile Governments from ruling its former colonies. In Somalia, this implied a smooth backing of the SYL. Most of Italy’s foreign aid was spent during the ’60s and the ’70s in wide-ranging assistance schemes but Italy did not provide the military aid deemed as necessary to the ‘Great Somalia’ design – entrenched in Somali politics – in order not to foster inter-State clashes. Starting from 1966 the USSR, on the other hand, provided Somalia with the armaments it needed.

The place the Horn of Africa had within the general framework of international relations seemed, nonetheless, quite definite and tensions between States well restrained. Underground internal tensions led, conversely, to a gradual
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...weakening of democratic institutions and to increased clan fidelity, especially at the end of the '60 and the beginning of the '70s.

_Siyad Barre’s military coup_

Colonel Mohammed Siyad Barre’s military coup, in 1969, seemingly put a temporary end to this drift. His Revolution represented a sheer failure of western efforts aimed at keeping Somalia on their side; it sanctioned, on the other hand, a temporary internal unity under the flag of Socialism. The United States and Britain soon stepped away from Somalia’s new regime. Italy, instead, resorted to a more pragmatic approach and waited for better relations to come, while continuing with its cooperation programme. Barre had been trained, after all, in Italian military Academies. He kept in touch with old circles, though not with established political parties. It seemed likely to some observers that such USSR-backed leader could overcome personal disputes and egotisms and try and unify existing clans. His nationalism led, instead, to war against Ethiopia in 1977-78 over the Ogaden region.

Such confrontation proved to be the circumstance for a major shift in regional alliances. The USSR abandoned Somalia in order to support Ethiopia, whereas the USA decided to support – with 887 million dollars in foreign assistance, including 200 million dollars in arms – its old regional enemy. This révirement, and the major international backing Barre enjoyed afterwards, only accentuated the existing internal rift between the pro-Barre elite (essentially his own Marrehan clan of the Darod clan family) and the remaining Somali population, in the meantime more and more fragmented along a growing series of power fault lines all over the country. Defeat against Ethiopia increased social unrest and allegations of misgovernment; having already failed in using a nationalist option, Siyad Barre could no longer control internal opposition other than with totalitarian methods.

Once US support had ceased, and enemy factions had grown more powerful, he was ousted, in January 1991. This resulted in the Somali State disintegrating along clan and regional lines.
The turmoil following Barre’s expulsion offered international powers the chance to enter the Somali arena once more. Again, each of them had its specific interests and counted on different local actors in order to secure its power and influence, thus impeding an autonomous and durable outcome. Even a UN-led intervention could neither alleviate famine problems (which affected primarily Somalia’s southern regions) nor restore order, until civil war broke out between rival factions in 1993.

Initially, General Mohamed Farah Aideed seemed to have the necessary support in order to challenge Ali Mahdi Mohammed’s United Somali Congress and establish a new regime in Mogadishu. The United States, which had stepped into Somalia as of end of 1992, seemed to initially sponsor his action. Suddenly, and quite surprisingly even for its allies, Washington stopped supporting General Aideed. A remarkable degree of incomprehension – notably with Italy – worsened an already difficult situation which was never fixed again and caused UN forces to withdraw in 1995.

Subsequent efforts aimed at rebuilding a State only resulted in creation of personal militias, each of which took control of a limited area, a situation that somewhat recalled medieval fiefdoms. The main reason for such failures dates back to the over four decades of existence of the Somali State, the endemic rivalries connected to it, and to the conspicuous flow of weapons which has been directed towards Somalia since 1966.

A turning point came only when the National Reconciliation Conference, called in Djibouti in 2000, succeeded in attracting genuine international support both from African and European actors (notably the IGAD and Italy), a fundamental factor in order to overcome personal and regional differences. The works of the Conference speeded up with the latter transformed into a National Parliament in 2003. It was not able to elect the Government, however, until the second half of 2004.

The Transitional Federal Government so installed – the fourteenth attempt to establish such an institution in Somalia – had to confront both strengthened clan ties and regional bonds, as in the case of Somaliland and of Puntland. In Mogadishu, it had to tackle growing opposition from the Union of the Islamic Courts. Mogadishu residents and merchants were more prone to support them instead of the secular warlords – some of which took part in the Transitional Government – as the Courts ensured rule of law and security in districts of the capital under their control instead of the anarchy which characterized other parts of the city, although strict Sha’ria observance has never been part of Somali way of life. In early June, 2006, the Union took almost entire control of Mogadishu, which it gained wholly in July.

We can now both understand the very fragile political balances that have been
reached and the difficulties still lingering on, as well as move on to analyse other important economic and strategic factors.

*The economy between 1991 and 2004*

Throughout the 1990's, Somalia’s economy has consisted mainly of self-employment and small primary sectors activity. These are essentially based on local markets and relations and were not endangered by changes in the institutional frame. Agriculture could not assure, however, the growth of Somalia’s economy, as it is compelled by heavy natural restraints. Somali climate is mostly desert, rainfall is irregular and arable land accounts only for less than 2% of national soil, its major part being formed by sterile crops. Livestock, hides, fish, charcoal and bananas are Somalia’s main exports – although a recent Saudi ban on livestock import from the Horn of Africa has blocked, lately, that source of sustenance; sugar, sorghum, corn and machined goods are Somalia’s principal imports.

*International awakening*

An important question to be answered is why did it take ten years and a great number of unsuccessful tries in order to form a new functioning Government since the fall of Siyad Barre. During this period the international community practically forgot Somalia and let it descend into anarchy (though some Somali observers challenge this definition), before attention could finally be dedicated back to the Horn of Africa again.

*Terror alert*

It was only after September 11th brought up the issue of international terrorism, that the existing power vacuum at the very edge of the Middle East, Africa and Southern Asia started being perceived as unbearable.
Military actions carried out in Afghanistan, while succeeding in defeating the Taliban government, made it clear that at least dozens of its supporters (some speculated even Osama Bin Laden himself among them) fled to Somalia. Reportedly, a group named Al-Itihaad, linked to Al-Qaeda, organised its training camps in Somalia. Worse still, terrorists found here a prosperous environment from which to draw the social support they needed, as poverty, famine, the struggle against western firm and a massive presence of ammunition made it simpler to operate. The UN itself declared Somalia as, at least, a transit point for those behind the 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, as well as behind a 2002 attack on a hotel in Kenya. Somalia becomes, in this light, a possible haven for al-Qaeda supporters. This endangers also its economy. At the end of December, a construction works have been halted in the port of Bosaso, as they seemed linked with Bin Laden interests.

On the other hand, however, most Somalis deny the presence of terror camps in the country, attributing every action taken in that sense to a plan put into place by foreigners.

Security of sea routes

Piracy along Somalia’s coasts has been another issue calling for international attention. Lack of an organized power able to control the long coastline protruding into the Indian Ocean, on a much trafficked route between the Mediterranean Sea, southern Africa and Asia, resulted in an uncontrolled surge of pirate activity. The Dangerousness of these bandits, driven by poverty and lawlessness, overtook that of those involved in routes traditionally plagued by such a threat, such as the Straits of Malacca in South-East Asia. In particular, Somalia’s southern coasts seem more unsafe but piracy extends, in fact, even to Kenyan and Tanzanian coasts. The attacks being similar in style, as well as their close timing and locations, suggest that single criminal groups are responsible, likely with the approval of local warlords.

Luxury cruise ships – one easily remembers the attack on the Seabourn Spirit on November 5th, which led to increased attention to the problem – Indian dhows and Chinese vessels alike have been predated by little swift boats, heavily armed, both in national and in international waters. A warning figure – released by both the International Maritime Bureau and US Navy – advised ships not bound to Somali ports to keep at least 200 sea miles away from its coast. This is intended to avoid dangers and incidents: 35 of them were reported between the end of 2005 and the beginning of 2006, while only two had been recorded in 2004.

Somalia’s National Parliament has included such topic in its first session, backed by both the International Maritime Organisation and the UN Security Council. The situation on the sea is, in reality, much linked with what happens on the ground.
The Transitional Government has also signed a two-year deal with a private US marine security company, worth nearly fifty million US dollars, in order to carry out coastal patrols. Instability, however, has prevented such patrols from being implemented and the deal itself is under attack in Somalia, as its outlines remain quite ambiguous. Piracy is a debated issue, as it also slows down UN and World Food Program humanitarian help, in particular in Somalia’s southern regions where such UN agency has been forced to open a more expensive and less reliable land route to and from the Kenyan port of Mombasa.

New market

There is indeed something more at stake, than just securing a State does not harbour terrorists or pirates.

The prospect of a Somali development under new functioning institutions paves, in fact, the way to new economic possibilities especially as far as an initial phase is concerned, when the whole State infrastructure must be rebuilt: hospitals, schools, roads. These potential contracts are disputed among European States, Gulf Countries, India and China.

Italy has spent millions of euros in supporting both the Peace Process and the Transitional Federal Government in Nairobi until last year and is now among the two only States – the other being Belgium – to have opened more formal relations with Somalia’s new Government. On December 26th, on the other hand, a Chinese delegation arrived in Jowhar, the then Headquarter of Somalia’s President, in order to pledge financial support to the Federal Government. In the meantime, India pays a special attention to both curbing piracy and increasing its already existing commercial ties with Somalia.

European countries are well ahead in building commercial links, although these remain of still modest importance. They could possibly grow in the near future within a more stable framework. On the whole, Somalia could no longer be ignored – both in the international fight against terrorism and as far as more general globalisation issues are concerned. There came the moment when Somalia came back on the international agenda.

Internal needs

Security - Many Somalis, even war lords, have indeed become worried of the worsening situation. Mr Abdullahi Yusuf, President of Somalia and Puntland, claims that more than three hundred men of his militia have been killed by Al-Itihaad forces who are attempting to overthrow his government and introduce Islamic rule. He claims to have also captured several Al-Itihaad supporters, who, he maintain, admit being linked with Al-Qaeda and have declared their intention
to establish a Shari’a-based state in Somalia.

Another issue calling for an urgent solution is the disarmament of Somali society. Ever since warlords and politicians signed a deal to set up a new Parliament, in January 2004, and lawmakers elected Mr Abdullahi Yusuf as President, insecurity had always prevented them from re-settling in the capital. Mr Yusuf had called for African Union peacekeepers to help disarm militias but many warlords opposed this step, fearing both interference in national issues coming from external States – most notably Ethiopia, whose soldiers would have made up the most numerous part of the peacekeeping force – and a scenario where the President would be acting outside its duties.

The falling of Mogadishu to the Islamic courts – with the defeat of an “anti-terror” alliance, launched by former opposite warlords united under the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT), probably backed by United States – showed how well-grounded these fears were. A major issue now debated is Islamic Courts backing – if not hosting – people internationally recognized as terrorists. The UIC spiritual leader is himself accused of such relations with Al-Qaeda (although it is more likely that the UIC/CCIC be connected to the Muslim Brotherhood than to Bin Laden’s organization), and has lately been appointed as chairman of the Conservative Council of the Islamic Courts in Mogadishu.

Rebuilding a nation in ruin - Although many observers challenge the definition of anarchy and put a particular emphasis on the many informal – yet effective – links and rules that Somalis have followed throughout the 1990’s, it is evident that any Somalia’s coming leader will face a series of though problems. Few people earn wages, most rely on relatives abroad or on subsistence farming, hampered by recurrent drought periods, while lack of an organized central power also gave way to a surge of regionalisms.

Since May 1991, Somaliland has declared itself an independent Republic. Although still not recognized by any government, this entity has maintained a stable existence, mostly based on the overwhelming dominance of a ruling clan and on the economic infrastructure left behind by British, Soviet and American military assistance programs. Piracy is also more controlled on Somaliland’s coasts, the area has a functioning Parliament and relief aid enjoys a more reliable distributing structure. Lately, African Union officials have seemed more willing to tackle Somaliland independence demands. The Transitional Federal Government faces, therefore, the hard task of keeping Somalia from breaking apart into pieces. Although no real risk comes actually from neighbouring countries – Ethiopia, notably, stated that it would be the last State to recognize Somaliland’s independence – internal forces may take advantage of internal rifts, remarkably Islamic courts.

The President himself is aware that these are taking over civilian life, especially
through Islamic schools which often succeed, in fact, in attracting youths to fundamentalist principles. A society that does not run its own school system is indeed more exposed to such a threat and to any centrifugal force it may experiment from within or from the outside. The only hope for both the TFG and the TFP is existing disagreements across Islamic factions, as some of them – more moderate – contend power to more fundamentalist ones.

Another emergency concerns medical services. In Somalia, life expectancy is close to just 48 years, one of the world’s worst performances, and a quarter of all children dies before reaching the age of five. On average, for every 100,000 successful births, 1,100 women die. A functioning medical service is no longer in place since the demise of the State and local authorities, church missions and non-governmental organisations administer alternative, albeit limited, medical services, which can not, however, be compared to State-run hospitals.

Further economic aid - Performing such services, assuring land and sea routes control and training a police force, so that it can be to be in command of both the capital and independence-seeking regions, would cost a great deal of money which, obviously, the Somali State does not currently own. What’s more, even if some rains some twenty days ago sparked a gleam of hope, millions are starving across the Horn of Africa and Kenya, adding new obstacles to presidential and parliamentarian action. Within such context, foreign aid is of fundamental importance, especially if one considers that Somalia still has to confront its International Monetary Fund related-obligations, signed by dictator Barre.

Italy has hitherto supported Somalia’s Peace Process with an emergency aid programme worth 10 millions euros. This included two million euros in support for the reconciliation process, donated through the United Nations. Most recently, the European Commission has donated further 5.05 million euros in emergency humanitarian aid, in order to help the estimated six million Somalis affected by drought. Both African countries, within the IGAD frame, and Gulf countries also played a supportive role. China also pledged international support, whereas India tightened its ties with Somalia, especially after the tsunami of late December 2004.

Functioning institutions – a proper counterpart for the international community in order to sustain reconstruction – are vital in improving Somalia’s conditions, a concept that was well enshrined as the President opened parliamentarian works in February.

Conclusions

“Let us choose between serving our people or being put on the bad list of history as people who promoted confrontation among Somalis and lacked the skills
to administer a modern Somalia”, he said, adding that “Somalis are fed up with hostilities, displacement and endless violence. The people want peace, freedom and want to live under the rule of law”.

A clear showing of will aimed at bridging over mutual mistrust really had been a major event. In the end, though, neither a functioning Parliament alone nor international interest have been enough in assuring Somalia the common ground it lost during these past decades. A new actor has gained ground in these last days, further complicating the scenario but also introducing an element of popular support which had largely lacked, hitherto. Should political will be showed in finding an agreement with the Islamic Courts too, and international support be steady, attentive and unbiased (which, unfortunately, was not the case lately) – together they can help put an end, within a medium-term perspective, to the turmoil that has recently characterized Somalia.

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