

Class and Power in a Stateless Somalia

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Overview

This paper is a tentative and preliminary analysis of the role of resources and class interests in the conflict in Somalia. It should be considered as a discussion paper only.

The paper is specifically concerned with riverine agricultural land, pastureland and the resources that can be dispensed by a sovereign state, including foreign aid and currency. It argues that the description of the Somali civil war as a war between clans obscures the very important ways in which control of resources lies at the heart of the conflict. We must develop a class analysis of the origins and development of the crisis, locating it in the growth of state-mediated capitalist relations in both agriculture and pastoralism, and the key role that control of the state apparatus played in allowing capital accumulation among certain sections of the capitalist class in the 1980s.

The legacy of disputed ownership of real estate and agricultural land is a key element in the enduring crisis. The expectation that a future government will be able to bestow the same benefits on its favoured capitalists is a key element in sharpening the current struggle in southern Somalia. Meanwhile the stabilisation in Somaliland and the north-east reflects the success of certain fractions of the capitalist class in gaining control of state or state-like institutions in those areas. This is arguably related to the fact that the dominant mode of production in these regions is pastoralism and the livestock trade, rather than agriculture and aid.

The importance of clan lies in the fact that clan identity is the locus for physical security and military mobilisation. This arose from political strategies adopted by Siad Barre and his opponents, and is an enduring reality.

The strength of political Islam in Somalia is its ability to address the needs of certain groups that have been marginalised by both resource conflicts and clan militarism.

The paper concludes with a question. For five years, mediators have tried to achieve a power-sharing agreement in Somalia, as a prelude to setting up a national government, that would in turn address the basic economic and social questions facing the country. Might it be better to depoliticise the economic issues, settling them first? It might then be much easier to achieve a political settlement.

Class in Somalia

Somalia has a very complicated class structure. This paper will try to summarise some of the main elements.

Class in Agrarian Areas

The class structure in the riverine areas of southern Somalia (the irrigable lands along the banks of the Jubba and Shebelle rivers) can be described in the following simplified terms:

- **The 'farmers'**. These are the members of minority groups (Digil and Rahanweyn, Shebelle, Gabwing and various Bantu groups) who inhabited these areas fifty years ago and used simple cultivation techniques. In some areas, these farmers still own land and have set up good irrigation systems. Most of them are now reduced to an agricultural proletariat owning little or no land themselves.
- **The 'landowners'**. During the later colonial period, the 1960s, and above all the 1980s, there was systematic land-grabbing to create banana plantations and other irrigated farms. The biggest land-grab was in the 1980s when those closely associated with the Siad Barre regime were able to acquire vast areas of irrigable land. Sometimes the land was not even farmed but the land title was just used as collateral for obtaining loans from aid donors, which was then used for trade or consumption. Many of the 'farmers' were forced off their land at gunpoint and ended up as an agricultural proletariat.
- **The 'liberators'**. The USC of General Aidid overran most of the riverine areas in 1991-2 presenting themselves as liberators. But their aim was simply to replace the 'landowners' and not to return the land to the original farmers.

Much of the current conflict in the Jubba and Shebelle valleys has been between the 'landowners' and the 'liberators'. The 'landowners' anticipate that the restoration of a government will allow them to return to 'their' land when they produce their land titles. The 'liberators' fear this. Neither of these fractions of the bourgeois class has any intention of returning the land to the dispossessed 'farmers'.

Each area has of course its complications and cross-class and cross-clan alliances, but the above largely holds true in most of the Shebelle and Jubba valleys.

In addition, these processes of class formation are much less well advanced in the rainfed agricultural areas of Bay and Bakool, where a more familiar peasant-type political economy prevails. Bay Region suffered severe famine in 1992 because it happened to lie on the frontline between contending factions, and because the Rahanweyn people were marginalised under the former regime, and thus less well-armed than their neighbours. More recently, these areas have been relatively stable. This can be attributed to:

- The relative absence of land disputes, which in turn is related to:
- The relative absence of a state-mediated capitalist landowning class.

Class in Pastoral Areas

A class analysis of traditional pastoralism is notoriously difficult. But in the 1970s and 1980s, Somali pastoralism was completely transformed by the advent of large-scale

commercial exports. In the early 1980s, livestock exports through Berbera provided over 75% of Somalia's recorded foreign currency income.

This involved the establishment of a very complex trading and financial system based at Berbera port, with a network of agents and brokers stretching throughout Somalia (and, in the 1990s, into Ethiopian territory). The export-orientation of the trade entailed very careful management of herds as they moved north towards Berbera. An important result of this was the creation of pastoral enclosures to provide feed for these herds. In many areas, most of the best pastureland is now privately owned. Another result is the extension of credit relationships throughout the Somali peninsula. The operation of finance in the pastoral sector is unusual in that the herder extends credit to the dealer, who repays when the animals are sold in Aden or Jeddah.

Overall, Somali pastoralism is characterised by a unique but highly developed capitalist system, dominated by a handful of export traders based in Berbera and to a lesser extent Bosaso. In the 1980s, these traders came into conflict with the Siad Barre government. But the government never succeeded in capturing the livestock trade: its agents were never sufficiently well-capitalised or efficient enough to displace the existing traders. This is fortunate as it has enabled these market and finance systems to re-establish themselves relatively quickly and uncontroversially after 1991.

However, the state did penetrate pastoralism. Siad Barre used state resources (drilling water wells, establishing grazing enclosures, sending in the army to impound herds) in support of its favoured groups. The Hawiye of the central rangelands were particularly hard-hit as their neighbours were Marehan. The losers in the dual processes of capitalist development and unequal state intrusion were forced to become urban labourers or rural bandits. In 1989, when General Aidid arrived in the central rangelands to begin the armed struggle of the USC, he found a de facto insurrection already in place. Since the collapse of the state in 1991, following a period of conflict, most of the former inter-clan conflicts over pastoral land have now become relatively stabilised. With no state power to intrude, a relative equilibrium has returned.

In the 1990s, the leading export traders of Berbera have played a key role in establishing and stabilising the Somaliland state, while those in Bosaso have played a similar role in the north-east. Those in Kismayo have had only limited success, which is related to the conflict over riverain farmland in the Jubba valley. It is likely that, in the absence of stabilised control over Kismayo port by a faction with reliable trading links up the Jubba valley, that the livestock economy of this area will become closely integrated with Kenya.

Most Somali livestock is now owned or controlled by these trading networks. An increasing number of former pastoralists have found that their way of life is no longer economically viable. Some become paid herders, others are active in the urban informal sector, others are militiamen. Many of their dependents live in refugee camps.

Those in the middle have turned to the fast-growing agro-pastoral sector. The spread of cultivation across many formerly pastoral areas, especially in Somaliland and the central rangelands, is a far-reaching socio-economic development whose implications will be seen in the coming decades. Alongside the farming regions of Bay and Bakool, this may see the emergence of a demographically dominant agrarian class in Somalia, characterised by poverty and poor political representation. If unhindered and unregulated capitalist pastoralism continues to develop, then it is inevitable that major problems will arise in the agro-pastoral areas. The spark for these conflicts will probably be land.

The growth of agro-pastoralism also has environmental implications that need to be studied, as many areas are unsuitable for cultivation or year-round grazing. In these marginal areas, agro-pastoralism is a step towards deepening poverty.

Class and the State

In the 1980s, one fraction of the bourgeoisie had access to state power. It tried to break the hold of its major competitor (the Isaak livestock merchants) but failed. Nonetheless, its control over the instruments of state power enabled it to acquire enormous wealth and control over large areas of agricultural and pastoral land. Its dependence on foreign aid and military coercion proved unsustainable and it collapsed.

This experience is of more than historical importance, for several reasons:

- Many of today's conflicts are a legacy of the land-grabbing and asset acquisition of the former period. Resolving these will require much legal archeology into the provenance and status of land titles etc.
- Finance acquired under the state regime is important in the viability of the present contending factions.
- The contesting political elites anticipate that they will be able to use state power in the way that their predecessors in the 1980s did. Hence the struggle for state power is sharpened: there is more to gain and more to lose than merely office holding.
- The hinterland for the Berbera- and Bosaso-based livestock export trade stretches throughout the Somali peninsular. Any Mogadishu-based government is going to support its own mercantile class to compete, commercially and perhaps militarily, for control of this trade.

This analysis has clear implications for the type of state structures that should be established in a future Somali government.

The Somali Diaspora and Hard Currency

A final element in the Somali class structure is the role of the large number of Somali expatriates in neighbouring countries, the Gulf and Britain. In the 1980s, the unrecorded remittances from these people was the largest source of foreign exchange in Somalia. Most of it was not sent through official channels. The flow of remittances does not appear

to have been unduly favourable to any major political or clan affiliation, though the minority clans seem to have been, as usual, disadvantaged.

Expatriate money has become even more important since the collapse of the state. It also appears that clan politics is more heightened and divisive among the Somali diaspora than at home. (This is certainly the case in London, where aspiring factional leaders find it easy to raise money on the basis of dubious claims about clan politics at home.) Diaspora money helps to fuel conflicts that might otherwise be settled. It also plays a key role in keeping the economy vibrant.

Clan, Conflict and Class

It is the interaction of clan and class that has made the Somali conflict so intractable in the south, while making it possible to reach a solution in Somaliland.

Clan Ideology

Somalia is normally described as a 'clan society' and the classic anthropological texts (echoed in state propaganda from Independence to 1991) have ascribed an almost fatalistic clan identification to Somalis. The Samaale clans (Darod, Dir, Hawiye and Isaak) are seen as the 'pure' or 'ideal' Somalis, the Sab (Rahanweyn and Digil) along with the Cushitic peoples (Shebele and Gabwing) are a deviation. This is nothing more than the ideological construct of a ruling group, supported by colonial social engineering. Historical research reveals a much more complex picture, in which the Samaale are in fact one branch of a common Cushitic tree, that came through historical circumstance to exercise military domination over the others.

The Militarisation of Clan

In colonial and post-colonial times, clan had a primarily social significance. It is only with the creation of a police state in the 1980s that its clan militarism became important. This was because of three factors:

- The 'divide and rule' strategy adopted by former President Siad Barre, which intensified during the decade and reached its peak in 1990-1;
- The destruction of civic organisations such as trade unions, which left clan as the only indelible marker for social organisation and inter-personal confidence;
- The clan-based mobilisation strategy adopted by the SNM following the loss of nearly half its forces in the 1988 battles. Until 1988, the SNM was a multi-clan army; thereafter it was a federation of clan militias, and its non-Isaaq members and recruits were mostly encouraged to create or join other movements (notably the USC).

Because of the clan-based system of patronage and reward established by Siad Barre, clan identity had certain class characteristics in the late 1980s and early '90s. For example, the USC of Aidid included many marginalised herders from the central rangelands, while the USC-Ali Mahdi was more urban. However, the large clan-based

coalitions that existed in 1991 were inherently unstable. They existed primarily to try to seize state power. When this failed, the locus of conflict shifted to major strategic resources such as cities and ports. With the shift in locus of conflict came a fragmentation of the clan alliances. Thus the major battles of late 1991 and early 1992 were intra-USC and intra-SPM. As these conflicts too remained unresolved, further fragmentation set in. Alongside the fragmentation came a realignment, with fractions of each clan alliance allying with fractions of the other, and two main parallel inter-clan forces emerging.

This process was interrupted by the US-UN military intervention, which sharpened the political conflict (and later the military one) by introducing high expectations of statehood once again. The UN also tried to freeze the political process whereby the clan-based factions had been fragmenting, by awarding representation to these existing but inherently unstable fractions. With a seat at the UN conference table came resources. Political organisations have therefore formed around very weak socio-economic bases, as vehicles to compete for external recognition and the resources that accompany it.

Fragmentation and a New Order in Somaliland

In the case of Somaliland, this impasse was broken because of a combination of circumstances, including:

- Near-total fragmentation of the clan fractions;
- The ability to resolve resource disputes;
- Dominant position of a single class (livestock traders) within a single clan family (Isaak);
- Creation of a new state based on a single region;
- Lowered expectations of the resources that statehood would bring (because the state knew it would not be recognised immediately).

In Somaliland, the process of fragmentation was more rapid and more complete than in southern Somalia. By late 1992, conflict was over local resources between very local fragments of clans. These conflicts could be resolved and a regional order re-established, culminating in the Boroma Conference and the establishment of a national Somaliland government. Key to the establishment of a functional order was cooperation between the Berbera-based livestock traders, who were terrified by the commercially disastrous implications of the fighting in Berbera in mid-1992.

But as that governmental order gained power, legitimacy and resources, it re-ignited conflict. The spark for renewed civil war in 1994 was the issuance of the new Somaliland currency, which promised to give the Somaliland government, for the first time, real resources to dispense. Fortunately, this conflict was ultimately resolved in favour of stability.

This stability in turn reflected the ability of a class of capitalists (primarily livestock traders) to exert influence over the state structures, largely capturing the emergent state, and creating hegemonic control over regional resources. The Republic of Somaliland may

be described as a profit-sharing agreement among the dominant livestock traders, with a constitution appended. There are few major property disputes outstanding in Somaliland: Hargeisa was never the national capital and therefore did not attract businessmen from across the country to invest. A land-grab is however in process, as entrepreneurs enclose pastoral land for grass production. The deregulation of land tenure leaves poor herders and agro-pastoralists with little livelihood security. The land-grab is generating social tensions as it intensifies stratification but is unlikely to contribute to armed conflict. Market access to the Somali-inhabited regions of Ethiopia for the livestock trade has been important to this stabilisation. (It will be interesting to monitor the impact of the commercialisation of pastoralism in Ethiopia's Region 5 over the coming years, as it undergoes a similar process of socio-economic stratification and change to that undergone in the central rangelands of Somalia ten years ago.)

The Somaliland government has been able to provide physical security and an enabling environment for the return of relative prosperity. However there remain unresolved issues of access to resources, notably pastoral land tenure, that could be the basis for future problems.

The Impasse in Southern Somalia

Clan politics is inherently a zero-sum game. While all will gain if there is a stable and representative government in Somalia, all military factions fear that they will lose heavily if state control goes to a rival faction. Therefore, in a version of the 'prisoner's dilemma', any one clan-faction always has an interest in opting out of any proposed agreement. Until there is a government build on civic principles rather just than a clan-faction agreement, external pressure will be needed for the minimal consensus needed for a government.

Meanwhile, commerce progresses. Somali businessmen have proven themselves capable of continuing successful commerce without a state or regulatory authority. Moreover, in commercial districts such as Mogadishu's Bokara market, merchants of different clans are ready to collaborate in providing joint security.

In the wider context, however, this has not enabled the consolidation of a dominant class that can stabilise the state. Two reasons may be surmised, both of which are to do with the role played by the state in capital accumulation:

1. The interests of the mercantile class remain divided. In particular, the issue of real estate ownership in Mogadishu is unresolved. Until 1991, as the national capital, Mogadishu attracted investment from all sections of the bourgeoisie, particularly those with state patronage. Many businessmen associated with the USC-Aidid are in possession of property claimed by others (mainly Darod bourgeoisie associated with the former regime). A second parallel issue is the possession of farmland by Hawiye 'liberators', which Darod 'landowners' want returned. For those contesting ownership, this is a zero-sum game. This is the legacy of the patronage power of the former state. Until now, the factions and mediators have assumed that the

question of real estate will be resolved after the state is re-assembled. Arguably, the order should be reversed: this question should be settled first. Various options spring to mind including an independent commission to assess property rights and claims, compensation payments, etc. None will be easy. But at least the question of property rights should be depoliticised.

2. The dominance of a future state is contested by clan-based military factions. The faction that wins will--it is assumed--acquire enormous powers of patronage to enable its favoured businessmen to prosper. As a result, the businessmen have to secure their future position by aligning themselves with a clan-faction. This problem is the expectation of the patronage powers of a future state. In reality, it is very unlikely that any future central government will have the same power to dispense resources as the Siad Barre government enjoyed. It is no longer the Cold War and far-reaching governmental intrusion into the national economy has gone out of fashion. But this needs to be made clear to the factions. Arguably, the future economic dispensation in Somalia--control of the monetary authority, mechanisms for contracting, land tenure system--should be established before any political settlement is agreed. This will take some of the heat out of the current political competition.

Resolving these two basic issues of political economy is fundamental to the possible re-stabilisation of the state in southern Somalia.

In Kismayo and the Jubba valley, the situation is complex, combining some characteristics of the 'northern' pastoral model of stability based on the livestock trade, with elements of the 'southern' pattern of zero-sum calculations and political instability. We might expect that the regional hegemony of a particular fraction of the capitalist class, dominant in the livestock trade, would enable the situation in Kismayo to be stabilised. However, divisions between different groups of landowner capitalists exist, based on some of the most acrimonious land disputes in Somalia. Military politics in Kismayo is also linked to Mogadishu and the prospects (or lack thereof) for a settlement at the centre. These divisions are likely to ensure that the conflict in Kismayo town itself cannot be resolved for the foreseeable future. One probable result of this is that herders and livestock traders in the Jubba valley will try to establish a stable economic environment by reorienting their trade towards Kenya, bypassing Kismayo. Their capacity to do this will depend on whether they can either make an accommodation with the Islamist groups controlling key areas of the region, or whether there is a military resolution in the region.

Marginalisation and Political Islam

It is notable that the territorial base of political Islamic groups such as Al Ittihad has been primarily among the main losers in the class and political struggles of the 1980s and '90s, namely:

- The political marginal urban class of Merca and Brava. This group, the historic core of the coastal trading centres, was relatively wealthy though not a major beneficiary of the state largesse of the 1980s. Not militarily mobilised, they suffered heavily during the war.
- The indigenous minorities of the upper Jubba valley, especially the Gabwing, who were dispossessed of their land by the Marehan in the 1980s and not protected by the USC in the 1990s. Building on the tradition of city-states ruled by Islamic law (Bardhere was one in the 19th century), al Ittihad set up a non-clan based administration in Luuq that treated the Gabwing and other minorities fairly. In particular it allowed them access to land.

Islamic organisations have also targeted the unmet needs of wider urban society, notably in providing schools. Parents of all persuasions are obliged to send their children to schools run by Islamic organisations because there are no alternatives. Attendance at these schools entails segregation of boys and girls, girls wearing headscarves, religious instruction, etc. Islamic agencies are also active in providing health care.

We may also expect them to move into other sectors such as micro-credit for farmers. The growing stratum of impoverished agro-pastoralists may present a ready-made constituency for the Islamists, in much the same way as destitute pastoralists did for the first USC mobilisation in the late 1980s.

The Islamist movement is mobilising around the grievances and frustrations of a significant sector of Somali society. It is worthwhile to study its approach to the land question in the riverine areas it formerly controlled. This may be a model for how to address these structural problems.

However, the Islamist movement is failing to tackle many of the fundamentals in Somalia. Because it is poorly capitalised, it is unable to make any meaningful intrusion into the political economy of Somaliland or the north-east. For the same reason it is unable to make any contribution to solving the fundamental political-economic issues of the southern cities. Should the Islamists obtain ready access to major financial resources from the Gulf states or from international Islamic banks, this situation may change.

Conclusion

The above analysis is a tentative and preliminary attempt to construct an analytical framework for understanding Somalia today, aimed at stimulating discussion. It lacks detail and requires much refinement. However, it throws into sharp perspective some of the otherwise-puzzling elements of the Somali crisis.

We can locate the stabilisation of Somaliland and the north-east in the regional dominance of certain fractions of the capitalist class, which have succeeded in establishing control over state-like institutions. This has been made possible by the absence of major property disputes rooted in distorted ownership in turn arising from former state patronage. In the Jubba and Shebelle valleys, and hence Kismayo, the

resolution of land ownership questions is the prerequisite for stabilisation. In Mogadishu, competition between fractions of the bourgeoisie is sharpest of all, because of the level of investment in real estate during the former regime, and the anticipation of the rewards accruing to the future capture of state power.

It is proposed that the current strategy to address the Somali problem--namely settling the sharing of power as a prelude to the formation of a government that will formulate national policies--may be exacerbating these economic conflicts. Instead, it is possible that settling the economic and ownership questions, and the level of economic patronage available to a future government, should be considered as pre-requisites for forming a government.