

State-building in the Horn of Africa: the pan-Somali project and Cold War politics during the 1960s
Sam Mealy

The conjoining of the Protectorate of Somaliland with the Italian-administered UN Trust Territory of Somalia on 1 July 1960 resulted in the Republic of Somalia, an incomplete state for a geographically contiguous nation. That the newly established Somali state practised multi-party democracy for the following nine years until the accession of Siyad Barre to power in 1969 is testament both to the radical ambitions of its leading politicians and to significant external support. Exceptional as the Somali 'democratic experiment' during the 1960s was – in comparison to the proliferation of strong-man dictatorships and one-party systems in most other post-colonial African states – its rather sudden collapse points the historian toward the broader problems of state-building in the Horn of Africa.¹ The Somali state represented a monolithic administrative structure superimposed on a nomadic socioeconomic culture unused to either the concept or

¹ A. I. Samatar, 'The dialectics of piracy in Somalia: the rich versus the poor' in *Third world quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 8 (2011), p. 1383.

workings of a centralised political authority. Located within this general context was the pan-Somali project that underpinned all the new Republic's policies for the decade. Claimed by its proponents as integral to the successful development of the state, the relentless pursuit of pan-Somalism in fact precipitated its takeover by anti-democratic forces. This national-regional narrative intersected with Cold War calculations as the Horn became a flare-up point for the superpowers' rivalry. Aware of its strategic geographic location, Somali politicians played US and Soviet interests against each other in order to extract resources for personal projects.

This paper argues that internal factors, in the form of domestic political agendas and fundamental inconsistencies underlying the Somali state, were primarily responsible for its vulnerability to military takeover. Acknowledging prominent Soviet complicity in the coup d'état of 1969, Cold War forces are conceptualised within the prism of Somali agency, and are thus viewed as a catalyst in the above process. The paper is divided into three sections. First, it explores the problems associated with newly won independence. Secondly, it assesses the pan-Somali project within the regional context; thirdly and finally, it analyses the interaction of the forces of pan-Somalism and Cold War strategic manoeuvring in the Horn of Africa.

Like many other newly independent regimes across sub-Saharan Africa, the Republic of Somalia faced ancient obstacles to state-building: vast underpopulated areas, poor communications infrastructure, limited literacy, and the resistance of nomadic-pastoralist groups to the state's extraction of their productive surplus.² There was no fixed telephone line between Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, and Mogadishu, whilst literacy rates in urban areas were as low as four to eight per cent.³ Except for the sorghum-producing areas in the extreme northwest of the Somali plateau, and the floodplains between the Shibeli and the Juba, where maize, sugar and bananas grew, the rest was camel country: arid and sparsely populated. Approximately seventy per cent of the population in 1960 – some four million – were engaged in subsistence herding.⁴ As a response to a fragile ecology and inhospitable regional climate, nomadic pastoralism impacted heavily on Somali social and political organisation. The patrilineal clan system limited the size of effective political groups and ensured decision-making was largely uncentralised, as authority was believed to be vested in not one person or institution but all males from the time of

² John Iliffe, *Africans. The history of a continent* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 267.

³ I. M. Lewis, *A modern history of the Somali* (Oxford, 2002), p. 171.

⁴ John Drysdale, *The Somali dispute* (London, 1964), p. 8.

their birth to their death.⁵ Pastoralism was not a unifying experience for all Somali: a small educated elite had grown up in the major urban areas. Moreover, the southern Somali cultivators who combined animal husbandry with agriculture arranged themselves in larger, more stable political groups, and had more clearly defined systems of authority than their northern nomadic kinsmen. Regardless of these differences, the idea and practice of clearly demarcated, formalised political institutions – a centralised state that could regulate and tax, for example – was if not hostile, than certainly outlandish to a people whose concept of authority was fluid and the idea of borders as flexible, dictated by weather rather than decree.

Compounding the antagonism between a sedentary institution of fixed geographic location with a largely nomadic people was the newly unified Republic's inheritance of two distinct colonial traditions. Administrators from the south spoke and wrote Italian, depending on the level of their education, whilst their counterparts in the north were trained in English. The Somali language, *Afsoomaali*, was not standardised and established as the national language until 1972. Discrepancies between British common law, Italian law,

⁵ I. M. Lewis, 'The dynamics of nomadism: prospects for sedentarization and social change' in Theodore Monod (ed.), *Pastoralism in tropical Africa* (Oxford, 1975), p. 433.

Islamic sharia and customary law (*xeer*) were amalgamated into one unified legal system upon independence; the Supreme Court was unsatisfactorily instructed to establish two separate sections to deal with cases from the two regions.⁶

Regional institutional differentiation was aggravated by the political division of power within the new Republic. Under British colonial rule, the Issaq clan held the majority of administrative posts in Somaliland but they became the minority in government upon unification. The newly elected president, Adan Abdalla Osman, and prime minister, Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke, were both southerners; in addition, of the fourteen member cabinet only four were northern ministers. In total, only 26 per cent of parliamentary seats were allocated to the north.⁷ Notwithstanding that the uneven distribution of political posts was somewhat justified – southern politicians had a generally more sophisticated understanding of government having experienced a measure of autonomy under the Italian Trusteeship since 1956 – this caused discord in the north. Northern malcontent was intensified through economic decline: standardising tariffs meant increasing commodity prices as tax rates of the north had to rise in line with those of the south, whilst the mass

⁶ I. A. Issa-Salwe, *The collapse of the Somali state. The impact of the colonial legacy* (London, 1996), p. 71.

⁷ Mark Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland* (Oxford, 2008), p. 33.

exodus of British expatriates withdrew investment from the region. In light of growing unemployment and the reduction of political prestige, the main political party of the north, the Somali National League (SNL) boycotted the vote on the provisional constitution in 1961, leading to its defeat by a small majority. In December of that year, a group of Sandhurst-trained lieutenants who questioned the legitimacy of the union, attempted a military coup – abetted by the SNL – that was quashed by the loyalist sector of the national army.⁸

Independent Somalia during the 1960s provides an historical illustration of Huntington's 'political gap' hypothesis: rapid social change and the consequent mobilisation of new groups into politics often outpaces the development of political institutions able to process their participation and demands. When political participation suddenly expands without a corresponding increase in institutionalisation, instability and disorder results.⁹ Political parties proliferated until the point whereby Somalia had more parties per capita than any other democratic country except Israel.¹⁰ 1,002 candidates representing sixty-four parties

⁸ Lewis, *A modern history of the Somali*, p. 173.

⁹ Samuel Huntington, *Political order in changing societies* (New Haven, 1968), p. 25.

¹⁰ D. D. Laitin and S. S. Samatar, *Somali: nation in search of a state* (London, 1987), p. 76.

contested the March 1969 elections. High levels of political expression were partly fuelled by the dire economic situation. The country had no industrial base, despite the Italians' rather haphazard attempts to create a textiles sector, and no significant mineral reserves. Somali GNP was approximately fifty-six million dollars, per capita income about twenty-eight dollars. Somali politicians' solution strategy to this wealth of problems was both narrowly specific and broadly unwieldy. It was to focus all resources on reunifying Greater Somalia.

Underlying the unsteady foundations of the new Somali state was its incompleteness. Although small in absolute terms, Somalia represented one of the few territorially contiguous ethnic nations in sub-Saharan Africa during the wave of decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s. The legacy of colonialism was the division of Somalia across five jurisdictions. Independence only achieved the unification of two of these: the British and Italian territories. Somalia's politicians harboured irredentist aspirations to 're-unite' the lost territories of French Somaliland (modern day Djibouti), the Northern Frontier District (NFD) of Kenya, and the Ogaden and Haud regions on the Ethiopian-Somali border into a Greater Somalia.¹¹ The pan-Somali project was symbolised by the new Republic's flag: a five-pointed white star on a blue

¹¹ Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland*, p. 24.

background, one point for each Somali ethnic region. Somalia was thus a nation in search of a state.¹² During his first year in office, Sharmarke summarised the conundrum well:

Our misfortune is that our neighbouring countries, with whom, like the rest of Africa, we seek to promote constructive and harmonious relations, are not our neighbours. Our neighbours are our Somali kinsmen whose citizenship has been falsified by indiscriminate "arrangements". They have to move across artificial frontiers to their pasturelands. They occupy the same terrain and pursue the same pastoral economy as ourselves. We speak the same language. We share the same creed, the same culture, and the same traditions. How can we regard our brothers as foreigners? Of course we all have a strong and very natural desire to be united.¹³

Domestic and foreign policy revolved around this dilemma. Sharmarke, President Egal, and other leading politicians of the 1960s committed themselves to extending the boundaries of the Somali state to include those Somalis who by dint of colonial borders were citizens of other countries. This proved to be a problematic project. French Somaliland had voted against complete emancipation and had chosen to remain an overseas territory of France in the 1958 Gaullist

¹² Laitin and Samatar, *Somali*, p. 129.

¹³ Somali government information services, *The Somali peninsula: a new light on imperial motives* (London, 1962), p. vi.

referendum.¹⁴ Although the political landscape had altered dramatically since that referendum, there was no clear indication that the Somali elements of French Somaliland's population were mobilised enough to wrest further change from the metropolis.

The situation in Kenya with the NFD was even more fraught. On the cusp of achieving independence from Britain, Kenya's leading politicians were preoccupied with a far-reaching project of nation-building in the aftermath of the Mau Mau insurgency. The Somali government invited independently Jomo Kenyatta of KANU and Ronald Ngala of KADU to visit the Republic with their party colleagues during the summer of 1962; the meetings to discuss the problem of the NFD took place in July and August respectively.¹⁵ Reacting to the charge that the aspirations of Somali and African unity were mutually incompatible, President Abdalla said at the state dinner in honour of Kenyatta on July 28 that:

(...) the principle of self-determination, when used properly to unify and enlarge an existing state with a view towards its absorption in a federal system of government is neither balkanisation nor fragmentation. It is a major contribution to unity and stability, and

¹⁴ Lewis, *A modern history of the Somali*, p. 131.

¹⁵ Drysdale, *The Somali dispute*, p. 114.

totally consistent with the concept of Pan-Africanism.¹⁶

But Sharmarke's and Abdalla's ideal of a wholly unified Somalia did threaten African unity, or at least according to other African leaders' conception of that unity. Somali leaders invocation of the Wilsonian principle of self-determination for every people, if applied universally across sub-Saharan Africa, would essentially institutionalise the right of every ethnic tribe and clan to its own nation state. This principle was unpopular: the idea that the Igbos were entitled to their state in Biafra was anathema to the Nigerian regime.¹⁷ Kenyatta was cognisant of the potential harms posed by the precedent of a Greater Somalia to a soon-to-be independent, but still highly fractious, Kenya. He thus hoped that Somalia would join an East African Federation and hypothesised a possible solution to the NFD problem within such a framework. But Kenyatta's public pronouncements went further than this. He argued that the NFD was part of Kenya and as such the issue of the Somali community within the NFD was a 'domestic affair of Kenya.'¹⁸ This statement caused great consternation throughout the Somali body politic on both sides of the border.

¹⁶ Quoted in Drysdale, *The Somali dispute*, p. 116.

¹⁷ Laitin and Samatar, *Somalia*, p. 130.

¹⁸ Drysdale, *The Somali dispute*, p. 118.

It also informed the British position: the refusal to publicly endorse reunification and the declaration, by new colonial secretary Duncan Sandys, that the NFD was to be brought into Kenya's regional constitution.¹⁹ Despite its role as one of Somalia's biggest foreign aid benefactors, the Somali government formally severed diplomatic relations with Britain on 12 March 1963.

The Republic's actions were gradually isolating it from the rest of the African and international community. At the inaugural meeting of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) at Addis Ababa in May 1963 President Abdalla's speech advocating the swift amalgamation of a Greater Somalia was poorly received. All thirty African governments signed the OAU charter, which recognised the sanctity of Africa's colonial borders.²⁰ Abdalla's radical argument – that territorial integrity represented an outmoded concept, whose roots were embedded in colonialism and as such was not necessarily useful or in the best interests of post-colonial states – fell on deaf ears.

¹⁹ Lewis, *A modern history of the Somali*, p. 192.

²⁰ J. A. Lefebvre, 'The United States, Ethiopia and the 1963 Somali-Soviet arms deal: containment and the balance of power dilemma in the Horn of Africa' in *The journal of modern African studies*, vol. 30, no. 4 (Dec. 1998), p. 631.

The relentless quest for national reunification was damaging: not only did it divert political salience and material resources away from much-needed internal development but it also increasingly isolated Somalia from the African community. Moreover, ever since the religiously inspired struggles of Sayyid Mohammed Hassan during the first two decades of the twentieth century, Somali irredentist ambitions provided the historical driver of frontier violence. Bolstered by the support of 200,000 ethnic Somali living in the NFD, irredentists fuelled a four year *shifto* war there after Britain granted Kenya her independence in 1963.²¹ Designs on the final separated territory, the Ogaden and Haud regions, were also impossible to fulfil through constitutional means. The Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) was founded in 1961, and supported with financial aid from the central government, fought an insurgency war in the Ogaden until defeat to the Ethiopian military in 1964.²² After a few fruitless years of regional politicking, Somali politicians concluded that their irredentist aspirations required significantly enhanced military capacity to be realised (despite constitutional provisions denouncing war as a means of settling international disputes). The eruption of the first major crisis of the modern

²¹ Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland*, p. 35.

²² Laitin and Samatar, *Somalia*, p. 136.

era in the Ogaden, in conjunction with the ongoing *shifto* war in the NFD, sparked off an arms race in the Horn and instigated a relationship between the Soviets and the Somali military that would have significant implications for the future development of the state.

The escalating border disputes between Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia coincided with an increasingly precarious security dilemma between the Cold War superpowers. The Horn and its environs had been viewed as a strategic zone by the great powers ever since Britain established a coaling station at the harbour city of Aden in present-day Yemen in 1839.²³ Protection of the increasingly dense mercantile traffic that passed through the Gulf of Aden, and control of the oil shipping lanes there, enhanced its geostrategic nature. Soviet policy toward Africa was reoriented after Stalin's death in 1953. Khrushchev supported communist parties in broad-based coalitions in Nigeria, Senegal and South Africa in the struggle for 'national democratic revolution'; such struggles were seen as incremental steps toward socialism.²⁴ The US was committed to decolonisation but did not want to alienate

²³ Garnet Kindervater and Isaac Kamola, 'Sailing the capitalist seas: piracy and accumulation in the Gulf of Aden' presented at *International studies association* annual meeting, Montreal (Mar. 2011), p. 6.

²⁴ Peter Duignan and L. H. Gann, *The United States and Africa. A history*, (Cambridge, 1984), p. 285.

its NATO allies by speeding up the process. Continuity in US-African foreign policy spanned the Eisenhower-Kennedy-Johnson administrations. Deeply-held modernisation ideals, support for constitutionalist nationalists, and efforts to contain the Soviets. But furthering these objectives simultaneously was a delicate balancing act. US support of the British proposal to unify Somalia upset her old ally Haile Selassie and precipitated his long-term credit agreement for one hundred million dollars with the USSR in June 1959.²⁵ The Kennedy administration was committed to the principle of arms restraint in sub-Saharan Africa but the Cold War warrior mentality of the president's New Frontier and the increasing bullishness of Soviet policy in the region forced its hand. The McNamara-Merid agreement of November 1962 ratcheted up US economic and military assistance to Ethiopia in exchange for continued access to Kagnaw station, the Americans' crucial communications base in Asmara.²⁶

The Kennedy administration attempted to convince the Somali government that aid to Ethiopia was in its best interests. This rang hollow to Sharmarke, who began actively courting the Soviets. Soviet naval expansionism during the early 1960s had already begun to threaten US interests in the

²⁵ Lefebvre, 'The United States, Ethiopia and the 1963 Somali-Soviet arms deal', p. 617

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 625.

Indian Ocean. This threat was made more real by its construction of a military port at Berbera on the coast of Somalia in 1962.²⁷ The Republic's definitive turn toward the USSR was driven by a combination of internal constraints and external factors. Although the largely British- and Italian-educated governing elite initially supported Western patronage and aid, the West's increasing reluctance to move on the pan-Somali issue weakened such ties. Moreover, and partly because of the lack of traction on the reunification project, the Somali Youth League government was begin to strain under opposition pressure and needed to recapture public support in light of upcoming elections. Sharmarke thus refused a combined Western military offer worth approximately eighteen million dollars in 1963 and accepted a thirty-million-dollar package from the USSR in its stead.²⁸ As part of the deal, the Soviets helped build an army of 14,000 men, sent 300 advisors to Somalia, whilst 500 Somali military personnel were trained in the USSR.²⁹ The Soviet-Somali patron-client relationship was thus institutionalised. The magnitude of foreign aid flowing into state coffers was such that the

²⁷ Peter Schwab, 'Cold war on the Horn of Africa', *African affairs*, vol. 77, issue 306 (1978), p. 8.

²⁸ Lefebvre, 'The United States, Ethiopia and the 1963 Somali-Soviet arms deal', p. 612.

²⁹ Laitin and Samatar, *Somalia*, p. 78.

government could launch a Five Year Development Plan (1963-67) of seventy million dollars with half of the capital already being available. In the November 1963 municipal elections, the SYL won 665 out 904 seats (seventy-four per cent).³⁰

Western powers failed to prevent Mogadishu turning to Moscow because they were unwilling to augment Somali military capacity for border disputes with Kenya and Ethiopia. US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Williams understood the impossibility of Somali politicians renouncing their irredentist claims.³¹ Thus the heightened strategic importance of Kagnew in light of escalating Soviet naval operations caused Washington to abandon its position of neutrality on the Ethiopia-Somalia conflict. President Johnson authorised advisory and financial support for the former during the 1964 Ogaden War.³² Exogenous economic shocks exacerbated the rising costs associated with Somalia's border conflicts. The closure of the Suez Canal in 1967 and Britain's

³⁰ Lewis, *A modern history of the Somali*, p. 201.

³¹ Memorandum from director of office of northern African affairs (Newsom) to assistant secretary of state for African affairs (Williams) (26 Aug. 1963) in N. D. Howland and G. W. LaFantasie (eds), *Foreign relations of the United States, 1961-63, volume XXI, Africa*, doc. 298 (<http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v21/d298>) (12 Aug. 2012).

³² Lefebvre, 'The United States, Ethiopia and the 1963 Somali-Soviet arms deal', p. 641.

gradual withdrawal from Aden between 1967 and 1969 resulted in declining foreign revenues from portage and bunkering fees. In addition, Somalia's two largest exports, bananas and livestock, were hit hard. This deepened the Somali government's dependence on Soviet aid. Throughout the Cold War, Somalia was one of the highest per capita recipients of foreign aid in Africa. Most Somalis saw little of this large capital influx, however. Somali politicians became adept not only at attracting foreign aid but also siphoning it away for personal uses. Many leading SYL politicians were seen driving around the mostly unpaved roads of Mogadishu in limousines during the latter half of the tumultuous decade.³³ Such strategies of extraversion further weakened the already tenuous bonds between the state and its populace.³⁴ The assassination of Sharmarke - then president - by a police constable on 15 October 1969, provided the catalyst for the Soviet-backed military commander Siyad Barre to seize power in a bloodless coup d'état.³⁵ The Somali public neither resisted

³³ For a vivid depiction of the corrosive atmosphere in the capital at the end of the 1960s, see Nuruddin Farah's novel *The naked needle* (London, 1976).

³⁴ J. F. Bayart, 'Africa in the world: a history of extraversion', *African affairs*, vol. 99 (2000), p. 222.

³⁵ G. D. Payton, 'The Somali coup of 1969: the case for Soviet complicity', *The journal of modern African studies*, vol. 18, no. 3 (Sept. 1980), p. 502.

nor protested; in fact, they welcomed the arrival of the military.

Histories of the Somali state have inevitably been coloured by Barre's subsequent regime of scientific socialism and various failed Western interventions to stabilise the region following its collapse in 1991, most infamously UNOSOM II and the Black Hawk Down incident. This retrospective context – with particular emphasis on Somalia's recent history and its status as a 'failed state' – focuses on the almost uniformly negative aspects of the West's historical presence in, and relationship with, Somalia. Because of this unidirectional perspective, Somalia ceases to be an historical actor in its own right and is conceptualised solely in terms of Western actors and interests; thus transformed it becomes an academic and political laboratory in which to test theories of colonialism, intervention, sovereign debt politics in developing states, and so on. This occludes the important role played by Somali actors themselves in the development of their state. From the brief survey of early independence problems and the influence of the pan-Somali project delineated above it is possible to appreciate the importance of local forces in state formation. As a product of colonial administration, the theory and practice of a centralised state was ill-equipped with the decentralised nature of Somali socio-political organisation. Once established and propped up by foreign funding however, it was run and

exploited by local actors. Decisions made by Somali politicians to pursue irredentist and personally selfish ambitions at the expense of internal development and support of political institutions conditioned the collapse of the democratic experiment.