

«THE SOMALI CIVIL WAR» (1988 - present)

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Abstract

This article that following the fall of Mohammed Siad Barre’s regime, leaders of different opposition groups mobilized the government, military, and clan structures towards their own political ends, leading to renewed conflict.

Key words

government, frontrunners, maladministration, reconstruction, political ideology, distribution.

INTRODUCTION

Two primary protagonists dominated the Somali Civil War; General Mohammed Farah Aidid and Ali Mahdi Mohammed. Secondary protagonists were Mohammed Said Hersi Morgan and Ahmed Omar Jess. Each warlord used the factions they led, the Somali government, military and people as instruments for pursuing their political interest. Each political leader’s interests and the instruments they used to pursue those interests will be analyzed in three categories: government, military and people. The Somali National Front (SNF), the Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM) and the United Somali Congress (USC) are the three factions the aforementioned leaders led. Most of these groups were bred out of Somali National Movement. I intend to explain how the faction leaders functioned as political entities inculcating a culture of violence and depravity.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The four leaders indicated above operated at the forefront of the Somali Civil War; they were not all on equal footing or represented an even distribution of rivalry. Instead, two emerged as frontrunners and the other two each supported a contender. Aidid and Mahdi were both frontrunners from the USC. However, through their leadership, the USC represented distinct factions. Jess and Morgan were subordinate to the frontrunners. Jess allied with Aidid while Morgan aligned with Mahdi. Consequently, this paper places more emphasis on Aidid and Mahdi as «supported» leaders with less emphasis on Morgan and Jess as «supporting» leaders. Since its establishment as a republic in 1960, Somalia has endured a tumorous existence. Neighboring Kenya and Ethiopia engaged in conflict with Somalia. Ethnic Somalis in the northern region of Kenya fought conflicts against the Kenyan government. Known as the Shifta War, these Somalis sought secession from Kenya and unification with Somalia. However, the conflict ended with a ceasefire and no secession. The conflict with Ethiopia was fought over the Ogaden region of Ethiopia between July 1977 and March 1978. At the time, Ogaden was home to millions of Somali people. Somalia held irredentist claims to the region. However, the conflict ended with Ethiopia maintaining

control over the region. While conflicts with other nation states were significant, the period of civil conflict was much more significant and divisive for Somalis.

But before getting into the internal hostilities, it’s important to first understand how Mohammed Siad Barre rose to power in 1969. Barre rose through the ranks as a gendarme. He displayed unethical behavior by western standards throughout his career beginning with his first promotion to First Gendarme. Facing disciplinary actions from his noncommissioned officer (NCO) instructor during the BMA, Barre struck a deal with the British officer Somali interpreter. When the NCO brought Barre before the British Officer for discipline, instead correctly interpreting the details of the infraction, the interpreting lied stating Barre was «very smart». Unable to speak the true nature of the infraction, the NCO stood by as the British officer promoted Barre instead of disciplining him.

RESULTS

There were other accounts of deceit which provided early indications of how unscrupulous Barre was before he rose to power. Barre, a member of the Darod clan, seized power during a 1969 bloodless coup d’état against Interim President Mukhtar Mohamed Hussein, who had only held office for six days. Hussein’s brief presidency was a result of the October 15, 1969 assassination of President Abdirashid Ali Shermarke. Barre advocated scientific socialism for Somalia, a political philosophy described as a contrived and awkward marriage of neo-Marxism and nationalism. He vowed to eliminate rampant corruption, restore security and stability and push an agenda of reconstruction based on self-reliance. Comparing himself to the Shermarke regime, Barre commented «Injustice and maladministration, lack of social progress and economic development, coupled with a sinking national morale, compelled us to bring about a change». One of his first acts as dictator was to ban tribalism by making it a criminal act to both publicly and privately acknowledge existence of clans or payment of «diya». «Diya» is the financial compensation paid to the victim or heirs of a victim in the cases of murder, bodily harm or property damage.

Violators were subject to arrest. Ironically, faction leaders could echo these earlier critiques when discussing Barre’s regime when he was ousted from power. The Barre regime’s undoing can be attributed to the classic case of overpromising and under delivering. The actions taken by the regime’s top administrative and military echelons, and increasingly, Barre’s closest family, were «blatantly illegal, immoral, and expressive of enormous contempt for the common people». For those outside of Barre’s inner circle, conditions were incredibly dire. Both in the cities and countryside, people grew more and more impoverished. Middle-class citizens could no longer afford basic amenities such as fuel for their cars. Farmers saw their capacities diminish as larger developments operating due to corrupt state officials forced their displacement. Injustice and corruption bred further violence and greed under Barre.

Regime and personal loyalty was valued more than skill and merit is just one example. Perhaps more telling was Barre’s belief that his regime was indivisible, accountable to no one and superior to any other political ideology. Nonetheless, Barre did hold on to power for more than 20 years until 1991. Opposition groups that set aside their differences and composed a united front that ultimately overthrew him. But why did the united opposition

groups that ousted Mohammed Siad Barre’s regime then devolve into fighting after the fall of Barre’s regime? A closer examination of Aidid, Mahdi, Jess, and Morgan follows to explain.

DISCUSSION

Unfortunately, that was not an acceptable compromise for Aidid and he did not acquiesce to Mahdi’s offer. Instead, Hawiye sub-clan conflict between Mahdi’s Abgal clan and Aidid’s Habar Gedir clan ensued. Mogadishu was reduced to a war zone «that divides northern and southern Mogadishu between warring factions. The area between them has become a ghost town, haunted by the memories of splendor and of failure. The hopes of the one-time residents have been crushed and twisted beyond repair, like the metal gates to the local palaces of commerce, art and religion». Aidid’s information operations (IO) strategy was effective against Barre’s regime. Aidid’s target audience for recruitment was about more than recruiting militia and defected fighters. Aidid’s IO campaign focused on anti-Darod rhetoric perpetuating the view that the clan represented «all urban wealth and power». This representation was not difficult for Aidid to support considering at the time of Barre’s fall, of the 103 key leadership positions held in the Barre regime, 56 were Darod followed by 25 Hawiye clan positions. Aidid’s USC faction target of the opposition and the civilians that composed them did not enjoy the sanctity of security typically afforded to noncombatants. This was true of all opposition groups. Between the two USC factions lead by Aidid and Mahdi, reportedly 14,000 people died and 27,000 were wounded from November 1991 to February 1992 alone. The northern region’s SNM saw Mahdi’s interim presidency as another example of southern arrogance. Largely composed of the Isaq clan-family, SNM forces had previously waged war against the Barre regime and capturing the countryside. The SNM supported Aidid’s USC forces. However, following Mahdi’s declared position, the SNM consider USC a better alternative to Barre.

CONCLUSION

The period of the Somali Civil War from 1988-1995 is externally described as «a ward of the international aid community». But more critical to Somalis, internally, Somalia is best described as a nation that devolved into a state of repression and expropriation. Faction leaders exploited clan grievances that existed before Barre’s regime and used the people as political tools to strengthen their own hold on power and territory were undermining the same for their rivals. Leaders used khat and food supplies to increase their own coffers favoring those clans or groups that displayed allegiance to their cause. Stated differently, «civil servants clever, powerful or well-connected enough to place themselves at strategic spigots in the foreign aid pipeline».

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The Aidid and Mahdi’s faction of USC opposed each other while dominating the provisional government. Hawiye clan in central Somalia composed most of the USC support-base. SPM, led by Jess was strongest among the Ogadeni clan of southern Somalia. Meanwhile, Morgan’s SNF was largely made up of members of the Harti clan.

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