

SAMIR AMIN

IS THERE A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEMS OF SOMALIA

The book by Afyare Abdi Elmi, ([‘Somalia: Understanding the Conflagration’](#), Pambazuka Press, Pluto, 2010) to the best of my knowledge provides unequalled documentation on the actors in the drama of Somalia.

The explanation of this drama, the decomposition of the state which has unfolded since 1992 (the fall of Syad Barre), demands a return to the country's history from independence in 1960 until the fall of Barre in 1992. And on this Afyare is terse (see page 17), to say the least.

I. THE TWO PERIODS OF THE SYAD BARRE REGIME (1960-1992)

Was the ‘first republic’ from 1960 to 1969 a ‘democracy’? Yes, if one views its practice of multi-party electoral politics and relative freedom of organisation and expression. But it was a ‘neocolonial democracy’, as were many African countries at the time. Its open economy, dominated by the traditional colonial interests of Europe (especially Italy and Great Britain), depended to an extreme on ‘aid’ (European and international). The First Republic disappointed all those who expected better and more independence and unity (of the former Italian and British Somalilands), i.e. virtually all of the ‘people’, including the middle classes - embryonic as they were.

The coup of Syad Barre (1969) was thus well received by the country as a whole. Because he promised to do what the neocolonial formula did not allow: ‘Development’ for the benefit of the country and its people. His characterisation as ‘socialist’, which Afyare adopts, is a bit too succinct and quick. Yes, the regime proclaimed itself as such, like many others in Africa at the time - those of the era of Bandung and Non-Alignment. Yes, it was more or less ‘recognised’ as such by the Soviet Union, which supported Non Alignment, which the Western powers by contrast saw as a ‘dangerous enemy’.

The regime was actually what I would call ‘popular nationalist’ and its achievements - during its first phase from 1969 to 1982 - were real and largely established its credibility and legitimacy.

The regime didn't just develop a ‘nationalist discourse’ on the unity of the Somali people, leaving open the issue of ‘recuperation’ of Djibouti, the Ethiopian Ogaden, and Kenyan Somaliland. It laid the foundations for a renewal of the Somali nation by the formal adoption of its language and by a marked development of education in Somali. It thus recognised the fundamental reality of this dimension of national identity: Somali's are not ‘Arabs’, they are an African nation with their own language and culture, and also Muslim. Economic development - however modest - of administrative and social services (education, health, infrastructure) provided a basis - albeit fragile - toward growing urbanisation and especially toward the formation of a middle class, gave the regime a degree of legitimacy.

This regime certainly was not ‘democratic.’ Not based on ‘Western’ criteria, since it was based on a single party, but especially because it was not completely ‘open’ to capitalism, as were other single-party African regimes (Côte d'Ivoire, Malawi) which weren't qualified as ‘undemocratic’! In today's language, democratic and market-based are recognised as the two breasts of ‘good governance’, and today, just as yesterday, Western powers are satisfied as long as an openness to markets is guaranteed (to the extreme), with or without democracy!

But the regime was also not ‘democratic’ in another, higher sense. It was facing a historic reality:

The importance of clans in the definition of the multiple identities of the Somali nation. Like many other African regimes faced with multiple 'ethnicity', the regime was content to deny the fact and, from there, to treat 'clan resistance' with contempt and repression. It was the same with Islam, which the regime, without being 'secular' in the true sense of the term (despite advances in this direction on matters of family law, less biased against women), denied the right to be political.

I have described this model of behaviour as 'enlightened despotism'! I even think that under the conditions of the country at the time, one could hardly aspire to much better. This 'enlightened despotism', had it been supported from outside - instead of being opposed - would have undoubtedly created somewhat more favourable conditions for a possible evolution towards democratisation of society and politics.

In the era of the Ethiopia of Mengistu, South Yemen, the Eritrean resistances, all proclaimed themselves 'socialists' and they were, with more or less the same limits. This common denominator - anti-imperialist and popular - could have been an asset to bring them together. Which is what Fidel Castro proposed: To build a large 'confederation' (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Yemen) balanced in national and religious terms. Progress in this direction, which was not 'impossible', would have both strengthened the position of this region (the gates of Suez) in its confrontation with the ambitions of the imperialist powers, and further expanded its base for development.

This was not the path chosen by the partners in the region. In response to the rapid exhaustion of possibilities for their development, in the fragile context of Somalia on one hand and the weakening inflicted on Ethiopia by the war in Eritrea on the other hand, the regimes preferred to choose the card of narrow 'nationalism' to restore their image, engaging in the Ogaden War of 1981.

That's when Syad Barre brutally became a 'turncoat', abandoning 'socialism' and Soviet support, which he bartered against the backing of Saudi Arabia and the United States. This reversal certainly says something about the fragility of the previous convictions of an individual! It's true that in this Ogaden war the Soviet Union sided with Ethiopia and made Somalia responsible, because of its armed support for the Somali Ogaden liberation movement. The USSR certainly saw, not without good reason, that Ethiopia was, through its demographic weight and its historical and firm commitment to independence, a far superior asset compared to other countries in the region. For their part, the US thought for that same reason that Ethiopia was the real enemy to be beaten in the region.

The second period of the Barre regime (1982-1992) cannot be confused with his first, as unfortunately Afyare does (an 'undemocratic' regime with no further clarification). The regime slipped toward the 'openness' (including to Saudi capital) so appreciated by the imperialist powers. At the same time these powers ceased to reproach him for his violent methods of repression, which however worsened, inciting clans excluded from power to rebellion. The penetration of political Islam supported by the new Saudi ally would then be able to thrive, with, again, the blessing of Washington.

II. THE DECOMPOSITION OF THE STATE

What followed was inevitable: The collapse of the state, clan wars and warlords, the arrival of movements proclaiming political Islam, the deterioration of basic living conditions, the destruction of the middle classes and ultimately piracy.

Must we then resign ourselves and think that a 'compromise' including clans and Islamic movements is the only possible response to the challenge? That would require forgetting that the clans do not want a state and the warlords are thus the real power that knows how to manipulate them. It would

require forgetting that political Islam is not capable on its own of governing any country. Despite appearances, this Islam is always at the service of those social interests for which it serves to mask reality: In the Gulf countries, the real power is that of archaic clan aristocrats who control oil incomes, and not the scholars which are little more than their ideological facades. In a poor country like Somalia, Islamic Courts may well give the appearance of government and are content to cut off the hands of petty criminals and subject women to male oppression, the 'small market' makes up the rest. This formula cannot rebuild the state.

This persistent chaos, is it 'acceptable' to the 'powers' and to neighbours?

Western powers claim in their speeches to want to help develop regimes associated with multi-party democracy, elections and open markets; and even claim that these two goals are complementary to one another.

This complementarity is not at all obvious, neither in theory nor in practice. In fact the only real objective being pursued is market opening, with or without 'democracy', which is sacrificed in the name of 'stability'. This requires a 'state', at least in those countries of interest for important investments (mining for example) or for their market potential. In certain cases, as seen in the Democratic Republic of Congo, it's enough to secure control of the mining areas of interest through associated Warlords or through foreign military intervention (as occurred in Rwanda). But for others, like Somalia?

The United States is still intervening in Somalia, but why and how? And what have been the results?

Washington claims that chaos is no longer acceptable, although undoubtedly it is in other circumstances, since it opens up opportunities for 'terrorists' (al-Qaeda in this case) with which the United States is at war. But can we lend credibility to that argument? 'Terrorism' has come up precisely to give the appearance of legitimacy to a project of a very different nature: The military control of the planet and thereby exclusive access to its resources. That is why the US does not insist on much in the case of Somalia, and leaves the warlords, clans and Islamists alone.

The US tried a first direct intervention. But it only showed their military and political incapacity to successfully carry out this 'police operation'. Twelve GIs killed and it was a stampede to leave! Washington then turned to Ethiopia, passing through that camp after the fall of Mengistu. But although the entry of Ethiopian forces into Somalia faced no serious obstacles, the new occupants once again proved unable to respond effectively to the resistance (who we called 'terrorists' or otherwise), let alone establish a stable government, and were forced to retreat as well.

The results of all these attempts to 'stabilise' Somalia thus came to nothing. But the persistence of chaos scarcely bothers the United States. Perhaps to the contrary, it is very useful; because it allows Washington to justify its pursuit of its 'war against terrorism' elsewhere, and for other purposes!

Somali chaos does not bother other countries of the region. Perhaps instead it helps create acceptance of the authority of Addis Ababa and Nairobi in the Somali Ogaden and on the Kenyan border. They may prefer this power to the chaos that accompanies warlords, clans and Islamic movements.

Without doubt piracy in the Indian Ocean causes problems. Yet we must remember here - something never mentioned in the mainstream media - that this piracy is a response to another piracy that preceded it: The plundering of marine resources and their destruction by pollution of the ocean,

unrestricted by a Somali state unable to enforce international laws. Somali populations of fishermen, who are the victims, had little alternative but to turn to piracy. Then, with chaos in the country, new Warlords found themselves able to become racketeers through this piracy. But this argument is corollary, and we would like to see not only the 'immediate actors' (the 'pirates') and the racketeer warlords in the dock, but also the foreign pirates who pillaged and ransacked the living resources of Somali fishermen.

III. IS THERE A POSSIBLE SOLUTION?

Unresolved chaos looms on the prolonged visible horizon in Somalia. This does not bother the Western powers, nor the neighbours.

But will the 'Somali people' be able, by themselves, to 'get out'? One isn't forbidden to doubt this. Examples of people engaged in fatal destruction do exist in history. Even imagining that the same powers and neighbours let things evolve by themselves in Somalia - which is by no means guaranteed - the forces in place in the country are all unable to rebuild the state and nation. Islamic movements are not better placed in this light than the clan directors and warlords. This particular Islam which proposes political Islam in all its diverse organisations ('extremist' or even 'terrorists' and 'moderate', so called) is definitely an obscurantist Islam, unable to help understand the nature of contemporary world challenges. It is a version of Islam at the service of primitive and brutal forms of exploitation of the weak ('the people') by the 'strong' (the ruling cliques who exploit the use of religion). And these 'strong' are nothing but transmission belts for the country's integration into the global system dominated by the monopolies of the Triad (USA, Europe, Japan). The Somalian 'small market' provides no means of resistance to this domination, and the leaders of Islamic movements may not even be aware of this.

But the possibilities of crystallisation of a new 'progressive' force which could understand it are weak, since the chances of developing a model of 'enlightened despotism' of the first Syad Barre have been ruined.

That's why I expressed the view that, even if an 'agreement' was able to be achieved by the forces acting on the ground (clans, warlords, Islamist movements), or even if one of them was able to prevail militarily (and both assumptions are unrealistic), no viable solution would emerge. The specific developments presented by Afyare in his book, including his detailed history of conflicts, in themselves demonstrate that there is nothing to expect from the mix of forces who occupy the Somali scene.

So? Could the 'international community' impose another solution? I seriously doubt it. First, because this self-proclaimed 'international community' is nothing but Washington, supported by its subordinate allies in Europe and Japan. And Washington is not bothered by the chaos in Somalia - it is even useful for the reasons I have given.

In addition, even in the event of some odd reason which would call for intervention (unlikely in my opinion), and even if Washington decided, the US is effectively unable to manage this challenge successfully. The Washington establishment is, on this level, close to the void - composed of 'elites' unable to understand societies of the Planet other than their own. The difference that separates them on this plan from the ruling classes of colonial empires is huge. The ability of the UN to intervene, the only legitimate institution to speak for the 'international community', is nullified by its submission to the wishes of the G7 (led by the United States).

The only possible solution to the chaos in Somalia would come from the African community, especially a community that could be formed by the countries of the region. The proposals made

some time ago by Fidel Castro thus appear a clear possibility.

But here again, conditions are not what they were at the time these proposals were made. In the present state of things, Addis Ababa is not interested in rebuilding a viable Somali state. Ethiopia is, and will remain, the centre of gravity of the region. It is the only state worthy of the name by its size and by the tradition of its political culture. This was proven by the failure to split the country on 'ethnic' grounds as envisioned by Washington. This project has not been defeated by the current alliance between the rebels of Tigray and Eritrea (and again in conflict with Asmara!), an alliance rallied for a moment by the projected dismemberment of Ethiopia. It was defeated by the 'people' of Ethiopia, however vague that term. An Ethiopian renaissance remains, therefore, possible. I would say even probable, if not certain. Although the formulation may seem a paradox, the reconstruction of a viable Somali state depends largely on the rebirth of a united Ethiopia, strong, independent, able to move forward in a line of popular development, an Ethiopia able therefore to take initiatives and lead the other countries of the region in this line.

NOTE:

This article should be read along with chapters VI and VII (the latter written by Joseph Vansy) of my old book, 'Ethnicity in the assault of Nations' (L'Harmattan, 1994), which deals with Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Iqbal D. Jhazbhay's book, 'Somaliland: an African Struggle for Nationhood and International Recognition' (South African Institute of International Affairs, Pretoria 2009) confirms my analysis: to escape the chaos that political Islam has created in the territory of the former Italian Somalia, the citizens of former British Somaliland seceded and were thus preserved in their peace; proof that political Islam is at the source of disaster for the Somali nation.