

EXTERNAL INTERVENTION AND STABILITY IN SOMALIA

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“the last thing the Horn of Africa needs is more foreign military bases, more weapons, and more European meddling. What we call our ‘strategic relationship’ isn’t about human flourishing; it’s about the EU’s ambitions as a superpower.... And what about the ‘local’ people? None of this benefits them” Clare Daly

Abstract: When external actors intervene in conflict to oust established authority, their interference often prolongs the instability and suffering. This is reminiscent of events in South-Central Somalia and the conflict has dragged for over two decades. Could peace have been established without foreign interference in Somalia? Was the African Union’s (AU) peace enforcement intervention really necessary? To have ignored the realities on the ground and opting instead to usurp the established authority of the Islamic Courts Union (at the request of the west) set the stage for the protracted conflict witnessed today in Somalia. This study argues that the lives lost and the financial burden of a prolonged conflict would have been avoided if the AU had adopted a Pan-African/indigenous approach in dealing with Somalia. While the ICU might have been yesterday, peace in Somalia is dependent on local initiatives to build the peace as exemplified by the evolution and success of the ICU and not some contrived foreign/external process. Thirty years of foreign intervention have shown that these will not achieve peace in Somalia. Process tracing is adopted as the method of analysis for this study.

Key Words: *Islamic Courts Union, African Union, External Intervention, Somalia, Local Initiative*

INTRODUCTION

When external actors intervene in conflict to oust established authority, their interference often prolongs the instability and suffering. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation’s interference in Libya that ousted Muammar Gaddafi and made Africa’s Sahel unstable since 2011, and the support of France and Israel for Biafra during Nigeria’s civil war that stretched to 30 months rather than the envisaged few weeks, are good examples. This same pattern has been replicated in South-Central Somalia and the conflict has dragged for almost two decades. Given the intensity of the conflict at the time and the existence of multiple warlords, could peace have been established without foreign interference in Somalia? Was the African Union’s (AU) peace enforcement intervention really necessary and was it the implementation of

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the slogan, African solutions to African problems? Much of what permeates mainstream literature lauds western interference and the involvement of the AU in Somalia's conflict (Segui, 2013; Agbiboa, 2014; Williams, 2014 and 2018). Unfortunately, what extant literature has been largely silent about is that, in order to promote their interest, external actors in Somalia's conflict ignored the realities on the ground and opted instead to usurp the established authority of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) (Cocodia, 2021). This action extended the life of a conflict that was being brought under control, and now sixteen years down the line (2007-2022) there is no end in sight. This study argues that the lives lost and the financial burden of this prolonged conflict would have been avoided if the AU had adopted a Pan-African approach in dealing with Somalia. This would have enabled the ICU deepen stability and achieve international recognition, while also being compelled to abide with global norms to make its authority more acceptable locally and to the international community.

There is no doubt that Somalia was in dire straits as a failed state, but the fact that it was seen as irredentist which made its neighbours (Djibouti, Kenya and Ethiopia) wary of it, and that several external attempts to impose peace had failed, was more than enough reasons for neighbours and external actors to stay out its affairs until invited to do so, or, until the country could sort itself out as happened in the north of the country with Somaliland and Punt land.

With Somali's being just one people, professing mainly one strand of Islam, and separated mainly by clan distinctions, it could safely be said that what obtains in one area or among a group of Somalis, would likely obtain in others and this is because there are so many similarities collectively. So, if the northern enclaves of Somaliland and Puntland could pull themselves from the brink of failed statehood without foreign intervention, then it was just a matter of time before the south-central areas consisting of the capital Mogadishu and environs, would get its act together. The south-central areas eventually did through the ICU, but Ethiopia was unwilling to have it establish itself as the de jure authority for this part of the country because a stable Somalia was a threat to her interest. Consequently, to break the influence of the ICU, Ethiopia sought to establish governments on behalf of the Somali people, and sold the falsehood to the US and its other western allies that the ICU had links to Al Qaeda. This was untenable to the US in view of its war on terror which was at its height and they backed Ethiopia in pushing out the ICU that had helped create stability in south-central Somalia between 2003-2007. Strangely, this period is seldom accounted for in most western media reports or western literature on conflict in the horn of Africa. Much of the efforts of the ICU at stabilising Somalia have gone unreported or silenced.

This study examines the role of the ICU in Somalia's conflict history with the claim that western and other external interference was not needed in stabilising Somalia, hence their involvement has only served to protract the conflict which was the true agenda behind the interference – to keep Somalia unstable and weak. South-Central Somalia's conflict stalemate, after fifteen years of foreign intervention via a peace enforcement operation reiterates the argument that interventions undertaken to oust established regimes often lead to protracted conflicts (Ianchovichina and Bader, 2018; Denison, 2020; Cocodia, 2021; Downes, 2021).

The ex post facto approach is applied given that the events under analysis have already occurred and the outcome cannot be manipulated by the author (Lee, 1985;

Awokeni, 2019). Data is derived from secondary sources, which has as one of its major flaws, the bias of the authors. This bias is evident in much of mainstream literature as seen in the silence on the gains of the ICU during its brief existence, hence much of the literature consulted were authored by scholars who have provided more complete details of the events in Somalia, and most of whom are Africans. This text adopts the single story analysis propounded by Chimamanda Adichie (2009). This analysis argues that for too long, Africa has been seen through a prism defined by the west. This analysis advocates that it is time African's begin telling their story the way they see their history, which is the way it really is, and not some version constructed by western influence to suit western interests.

THE ICU AND CONFLICT IN SOMALIA

At the end of Siad Barre's 21 years in power, Somalia was a deeply divided nation despite being one people, professing a major religion, divided only by clan affiliations. These clan division became the engine of the conflict that made Somalia a failed state. By the time Barre left power on January 26, 1991, most of the country's institutions, law and order were destroyed and Somalia became a deeply fragmented society (Haims, 2008). Anarchy spread in the country with many clan factions still armed from Barre's legacy, which resulted in wider inter-clan fighting and provided the catalyst for Somalia's descent toward state failure (Townsend, 2012) After Barre's fall in 1991, there were at least 15 attempts to form a government, most of which were contrived by foreign powers and functioned from outside Somalia. In 2004, Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) negotiations led to the establishment of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) led by Abdullahi Yusuf. The TFG had Ethiopia's approval on the basis that under Yusuf, Somalia will rest its claim to the Ogaden region (Hull and Svensson, 2008) While Ethiopia's actions were in defense of its national interest, it should be understood that based on the tumultuous history between both states, Ethiopia considered a weak Somali state dependent on Ethiopian support as a lesser threat than a strong one (Cocodia, 2018; Moeller, 2009). This propelled Ethiopia to undertake the forceful installment of the TFG. However, due to the caustic relationship between Ethiopia and Somalia, the TFG was deeply unpopular and increasingly isolated nationally, notwithstanding its support from the west, especially the United States (US) (Hesse, 2016)

While the TFG was being formed, the ICU was growing in legitimacy and popularity. As Robrecht Deforche, attests, "considering the failure of secular nationalism, the ICU umbrella successfully united the Somali people under the values of their shared religion (Deforche, 2013: 102)." The ICU had its roots in the Sharia courts which were communal centers of reconciliation and conflict resolution and whose establishment was in 1994. As noted by Ahmed Ibrahim, "the Sharia courts succeeded where others failed because they simultaneously built on known cultural and religious norms, authorities and practices while at the same time pragmatically responding to the demands of the moment (Ibrahim, 2018, p. 148)." He argues further:

The reconciliation efforts of the Sharia courts worked because their reconciliation processes and mechanisms emerged from and built on known local cultural and religious norms, authorities and practices. The Sharia institutions, authorities and discourses that led to the formation of the Sharia courts were indistinguishable from local cultural norms and practices (Ibrahim, 2018, p. 148).

In 2000, the various independent Islamic Courts of South Mogadishu formed a joint Islamic Courts Council. The joined up courts also combined their respective court militias to create the first significant non-warlord controlled military force (Barnes & Hassan, 2007). These court militias (youth wing) were the enforcement arm of the ICU.

Ethiopia's 2006 campaign was the last in a long series of military incursions aimed at degrading Islamist structures in Somalia. These incursions attempted to neutralize among other groups, the coalition of local sharia courts – the ICU. Uncomfortable with the ascendancy of the ICU which was at the expense of the TFG, the TFG president Yusuf made the claim that the ICU had links to international terrorists and was receiving support from foreign forces (Hull and Svensson). This last-ditch attempt was to give the crisis a radically religious connotation that paid off as it drew the attention of the US. So, backed by the US as part of its war on terror, Ethiopia and the TFG pushed the ICU, that by now had been labeled a radical Islamic sect with ties to Al-Qaeda, out of Mogadishu.

It was convenient to tag the ICU a radical Islamic group (Guglielmo, 2011) to justify the intervention, for as noted by Smith (2016), when local groups are on a collision course with the interest of external actors and national governments, a simplistic religiously charged terrorist or jihadist narrative is constructed to delegitimise the ethno-nationalist/nationalist agenda of these groups in order to justify the self-serving intervention of these external actors. Considering the gains made by the ICU in achieving stability in much of south-central Somalia, it is apparent that US and Ethiopian interests mattered more than the well being of Somalis. In explaining the external partisan hostility that greeted the success of the ICU, Barnes and Hassan (2007, p.153) observe that genuine multilateral concern to support the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Somalia was hijacked by the unilateral actions of Ethiopia and the US in line with their own foreign policy agendas. Unfortunately, much of the international community keyed into the actions of Ethiopia and the US due to growing Islamophobia that was fuelled by events of 9/11, and which rested on perceptions that Islam is a violent, aggressive and threatening culture that supports terrorism, is primitive hence is at odds with civilisation (Kaya, 2011).

Considering the failure of international intervention in view of the stalemate between Al-Shabaab and the African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) which is the AU's peace enforcement operation, it becomes pertinent to investigate the dynamics behind the success of the ICU as this would point the path the international community ought to tread if peace in Somalia is sincerely sought.

THE ICU, EXTERNAL INTERFERENCE AND (IN)STABILITY IN SOMALIA

An objective narrative of the period of the ICU in authority portrays a time of peace, fair arbitration of justice and overwhelming support from the people (Ibrahim, 2018; Anzalone, 2016; Deforsche, 2014). These narrative outline the local governance strategies adopted by the ICU that enabled them succeed where numerous international attempts at rebuilding Somalia had failed. The ICU, at the height of its influence had two major factors in its favour: Firstly, it had the support of a fair size of Somalia's top military brass, and this could be easily linked to the second impor-

tant factor of being widely accepted by the Somali people (Guglielmo, 2011). The ICU's role as a fair arbiter in civil cases, its deference to Sharia law, Islamic scholars and clan elders that derive from the culture of the people, provided it with the persona of the people's government. The popularity and growth of the ICU saw war lords align and submit to its authority which enabled access to weapons with which it became powerful enough to apply coercion in the enforcement of the law. In addition, a number of key positions within the ICU were filled by moderates who were even willing to commit to peace talks with the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) that was contrived by external actors led by Ethiopia that had been an antagonist of Somalia. The ability of the ICU to reconcile erstwhile warring parties/clans and a willingness to address the causes of the conflict (Menkhaus, 2007) enabled the ICU succeed where other attempts at stability had failed. So widespread was the support of the ICU that it received support from Somali diaspora communities in North America (Anzalone, 214)

In contrast to the gains of the ICU authors agree that external intervention never worked in Somalia, and nothing could be more significant in establishing this fact than the fifteen failed internationally sponsored attempts at establishing a government for the country (Namatovu, 2017; Abdullahi, 2018; Malito, 2020; Cocodia, 2021). In the face of these multiple failures, it is surprising that the international community still opted to contrive and impose a government on Somalis and to do this forcefully through the African Union and its peace operation, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). The activities of AMISOM has received wide commendation from the international community, scholars and the media, and in the same vein, pro interventionist scholars have been quick to make excuses for their lapses (see William, 2013). However, human rights organisations on the ground hold a different view. The International Refugees Rights Initiative (IRRI) (2017) notes that Somalis see the mission as ineffective and the general perception is that the peacekeepers are there to protect themselves and not the local population. Thus, the public perception toward AMISOM is one of disappointment. Considering the role of the public to the success of building and securing the peace (see Cocodia, 2018), the disconnect between AMISOM and the public (Somali life) explains to great lengths the failure of the mission. Hence fifteen years down the line, and the peace operation is at a stalemate (Namatovu, 2017).

Every group has a right to what works for them. Islamophobia or not, Somalis are entitled to this too, so, even if it is Islamic Sharia, so be it (Somaliland has thrived under Sharia law as its judicial system). Somalia's history has shown that the Islamic laws are woven into their culture, are part of their identity, so cannot not be wished away, but accommodated in whatever context that is implemented, and to which majority of Somalis would accede to. It is necessary to acknowledge along with Shire (2021) that in lieu of the seven year stalemate, it is time for leaders of thought to engage Al-Shabaab in planning for a stable Somalia.

Next is the fact that, the ICU was widely accepted due to its wide cultural and religious representation of the various community leaders in South-Central Somalia. This acceptance extended to its law enforcement youth wing that was fairly representative of the clans, and through its process of getting its members from the youth groups of the clans (Anzalone, 2014). Therefore the ICU evolved from Somalis as a people project in achieving stability and peace, so it easily commanded their loyalty

and cooperation. This was a major reason why, upon its overthrow by the Ethiopian backed TFG which was a foreign contraption, there was anger and tension among Somalis (Abdullahi, 2018) The aversion this bred toward the TFG has ensured that it remains “a marginal presence that is fundamentally incapable of stabilizing the country (Guglielmo, 2011: 110). The stalemate that has been with AMISOM for the past fifteen years in spite of foreign backing reinforces this fact. Leadership can barely survive if the people are not welcoming of it. Suave, mean and powerful as the Leviathan might be, Machiavelli recognizes this fact. The Prince, to be powerful, thrives on the support of his people. Foreign intervention in Somalia has always failed at this, and as the proverb goes, you cannot keep doing the same thing over and over again and expect a different result.

CONCLUSION

Over thirty years of external intervention in Somalia, the last fifteen of which have seen the AU in the fore, yet the country is still unstable. Despite the amount of money pumped in, the number of lives lost (of Somalis and interveners alike), and irrespective of which group is in charge, and how positive the international media tries to be on the gains of foreign intervention, the situation on ground is still what it is – Somalia remains insecure and a failed state (in reference to its South-Central axis). This paper contends that the era (2004-2006) and actors (the ICU) that the international community has tried hard to ignore, ironically, had the best success story of peace in Somalia’s turbulent history. Logic should then prevail that whatever strategy that was adopted, however these strategies were implemented should be revisited if Somalia is to plot a trajectory to peace.

The ICU may have been ousted, but it vestiges still remain on how it emerged from the people and in Al-Shabaab. If peace is to prevail in Somalia, it is for the international community to encourage the Somali people to evolve their own indigenous style of governance and its institutions, rather than dictate how these processes should go. It is high time that the international community learns that encouraging local initiatives is the most viable way for peace in Somalia. Islamic scholars, community elders, business men and all who culturally are entitled to be part of this process, Al-Shabaab inclusive, should be a part of this process. Peace will be easier attained with Al-Shabaab on board than without them. It is time Africans begin seeing Al-Shabaab for what it truly is and not what the west and its affiliates want us to believe.

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