

What Explains the Collapse of Post Colonial State In Somalia?

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Most countries in Africa faced different stages of colonialism with distinct policies in the process of colonial state construction (Young, 1994). Like other African countries, Somalia experienced different stages of European colonialism based on the geopolitical interests of the nineteenth century. Somalia is “perhaps best identified today as a country without a viable central government” and the current situation of Somalia need to be understand through the historical context of colonialism in Horn of Africa (Njoku, 2013, p.14). In this paper, I will shed light on the historical context of pre-colonial Somalis and the different stages of colonial state construction in Somalia that reflects the geopolitical interests of Western powers in the nineteenth century. In the process, I will examine the features of colonial rule in Somalia and the distinct approaches the British and Italians followed to establish the relationship between the colonial state and the population. Thus, I will argue that the colonial legacy of geopolitical interests in the Horn of Africa and the policy of indirect rule may explain the collapse of post colonial state institutions in Somalia in 1991 and the unfolding history of Somalia as a failed state, which currently is being represented as a battle ground of war on terror in Horn of Africa.

Feierman (1993) suggests that the analysis of African history should go beyond the historical narrative in which Europe is the center of the world because there are many different narratives of history in Africa. Historically, Somali people inhabit large areas of Horn of Africa that is “ bounded by the Republic of Djibouti in the northeast, The Amhar mountains in the northwest, and the Tana River in the South” (Abdi, 1993, p.4).

Linguistically and culturally, Somali people belong “ethnically to the Cushitic-speaking family” (Lewis, 2008, p.1). The Horn of Africa strategically located as it connects the

Indian Ocean, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (Abdi, 1993). According to the “written records of the Middle Ages” Somalis had trading connections with Arabs who converted Somalis to Islam, the only religion Somalis practice today. More over due to trade connections with Arabs and Persians, Somalis established coastal commercial centers such as “Zeila in the north and Mogadishu in the south” while Merca and Brava were similar commercial coastal cities in the south (Lewis, 2008, p.2). Furthermore, these commercial cities reinforce “the Islamic identity of Somali people” and also act as centers, where Somali and Arab cultures intersect and interact (Lewis, 008, p.2).

Feierman (1993) illustrated how the landscape and the environment shape and influence the political and economical system of most pre- colonial African communities. Although there are some people who practice cultivation in Somalia, the economic activity for most Somali people is based on pastoralism that exists in a semi arid land, characterized by constant movement because “nomadism as the prevailing economic response, and mode of livelihood and social institution in general are tightly adjusted to the scant resources of an unenviably harsh environment” (Lewis, 1988, p. 8). As the distribution of rain vary by season in the of Horn of Arica, Somalis move constantly across large areas of land in East Africa as nomads in search of green pasture and water for their livestock (Lewis, 1988). This constant movement may constitute clan as the basic political unit, where each clan may consist “population ranging from 10,000 to over 100000” (Lewis.1988. p8).

With the clan system as a political unit, there is no centralized authority that can represent all Somali people because of the “absence of institutionalized hierarchical authority” (Lewis, 1998, p.10). Traditionally, each clan is led by a Sultan with no “firmly

institutionalized power” because the position is “hardly more than an honorific title dignifying a man” (Lewis 1998, p.10.). Accordingly, centralized authority is “foreign to pastoral Somali society” and the decision making process for the major issues that each clan faces is much more democratic (Lewis, 1998 p10). Since there is lack of “hierarchical authority” Somali clans as a pastoral groups are not “held together by attachment to chiefs”, which is a common feature traditional governance in African communities shared in pre-colonial era (Lewis.1998 p.10).

Although there was no central authority that could establish political unity for all Somali people, there is a “ greater degree of national homogeneity” because Somali people as a nation share one language and common culture “ as both a unifying factor and a marker of the ethnicity” (Njoku, 2013,p. 12). Accordingly, in the pre-colonial time, there was a sense of nationhood that lacked “political centralization” because “clan constituted” traditional governance that was “supported by the family and lineage” system as a social and political institutions (Njoku, 2013, p. 15). In other words, during pre-colonial time, Somali people “were a nation, not state” though they had the “cultural prerequisite for state hood” (Lewis, 2008, p 27).

Jackson and Rosberg (1986) argue that Africa was dominated by European powers due to the inability of African traditional rulers to establish state institutions that could defend their territories from colonization in the nineteenth century. As with most Africans, who live in coastal cities, Somali people engaged in business with “merchant and businessmen” from different parts of the world (Njoku, 2013). After sometime, foreign merchants decided to take over and control “The Somali Peninsula” since there was no centralized political unit that could defend the entire Somali coast line cities

because the shared culture “was yet to translate into a purposely developed single statehood”(Njoku, 2013,p.49). For example, in the sixteenth century, Barava, which was a commercial city located in southern Somalia and was under the control of Portuguese (Njoku, 2013, p.15) Similarly, in the eighteenth century, most major coastal cities in Somalia such as Mogadishu and Berbera was under the control of subsequent Muslim authorities including “the Omanis of Zanzibar, the sheriffs of Mocha, and the Ottoman Turks”(Njoku, 2013, p.15).

At the end of nineteenth century, two European powers British and French, developed an interest in the Horn of Africa and “their primary interest” was to control its strategic location (Lewis, 2008, p.28). This set in motion the next stage of foreign domination for the Somali coastline cities in late 1800s, a time when “ the Somali Peninsula had been divided into four different zones” controlled by three European powers and one African power, Ethiopia (Njoku, 2013, p.15). For example, the British colonized northern Somaliland, with Hargaisa as its capital. The French claimed Djibouti, while Italy conquered Southern Somalia with Mogadishu as the capital of Italian Somalia (Lewis, 2008). As with many other ethnic groups in pre-colonial Africa, Somalis in the Horn of Africa are divided into many sub clans and are widely dispersed into a large area of land. For example, the Somali Nation is divided into four major clans namely, the Dir, Isaq, Darod, and Hawiye who live different parts of Horn of Africa. Because of these clan divisions and widely dispersed population, Somalis lack the political organization “to confront the world” (Lewis, 2008, p.27). Moreover, these divisions Somali nation facilitated the partition of the Horn of Africa by imperial powers into four different parts during the scramble of Africa (Lewis, 2008).

Accordingly, Crawford Young (1994) argues that on the eve of colonial partition of Africa, European domination of coastal cities in Africa were superficial because “the European state system became less secure and stable, statesmen began to connate colonial possessions with the equations of state power” (p. 84). The European empires that divided Somali people into different colonies started the process of colonization around the port cities of Horn Africa. For example, French colony of Horn Africa was based on Djibouti, the British empire of Horn Africa center was Barbara port in Northern Somalia, while the Italian colonial center of south Somalia was Mogadishu (Njoku, 2013) Although, there is common feature of indirect rule in the process of colonization of Horn Africa, Somalia people experienced it differently, particularly the process of colonial state construction because “there were also significant variations” among colonial powers(Young,1994, p.79).

As a result, each European power employed distinct policies in the process of colonial state construction in Horn of Africa and these policies originate the “historically shaped personalities as polities” of that country (Young, 1994, p.79). Additionally, Njoku (2013) argues that the claim of Somali territories by Britain, France, and Italy was “motivated by each country’s political, diplomatic, military and nationalistic” strategic interest first because of “ Somali’s strategic location on the Horn of Africa” gained global importance in the nineteenth century (p.54). For example, the British empire set out to acquire a territory in Somaliland in order to defend “ it’s Indian colony” and to secure food supply for its soldiers based “ station in the Yemeni port of Aden” because European powers started to have military interest in Horn of Africa after the Suez canal was opened in1869 (Njoku, 2013, p 54). Young (1994, p100) adds that “British

Somaliland served no other end than to supply meat and related provisions for the Aden base” while, “Djibouti was only a strategic port” for the French (p.100).

It emerges that the process of European domination in most African communities had two phases: “actual conquest” and “actual state construction” (Young, 1994, p. 90). In the Horn of Africa, the “actual conquest” by European powers did not encounter resistance due to lack of political organization of Somali nation. Thus, most clans in the Horn of Africa chose to collaborate with colonial powers instead of fighting against them. For example, clans in northern Somalia reached an agreement with British Empire to give them protection in their territories (Njoku, 2013). As noted above, British’s main motive to colonize northern Somalia was to secure the strategic position of the Horn of Africa to defend its Indian colony. Thus, in the phase of “actual conquest”, British authorities had no interest the hinterland of Somaliland (Lewis, 2008), Moreover, the British empire delegated the administrative work of Barbara port in Somaliland to Egyptian officials since their focus was to defend the Indian colony from the canal of Suez and Adan port (Njoku, 2003). Therefore the main task of Egyptian officials in Somaliland was to maintain the law and order among clans to secure the meat supply from Somaliland (Njoku, 2003).

After the uprising of Mahdi revolt against Egyptians started in Sudan in 1894, Egyptian officials were forced to withdraw from port cities of northern Somalia (Njoku, 2013). The withdrawal of Egyptian officials created a vacuum and chaos in Somaliland territories. At that time, British authorities realized that they had to start the process of colonial state construction in Somaliland territories to maintain the law and order (Njoku, 2013). It was during that period that British officials started to do administrative work in

the main cities of Somaliland and the policy employed in the colonial state construction of Somaliland was indirect rule (Njoku, 2013). This policy dictated that colonial officials rule the subjects of Somaliland through the recognition of the existing traditional governance and their leaders (Njoku, 2013). Accordingly, Sir Donald Cameron explained this policy of indirect rule as “to teach people to administer their own affairs, and it seems obvious, the wise course... is to build on the institutions of the people themselves, tribal institutions which have been handed down to them through ages”(as quoted in Njoku, 2013, p. 56). The policy of indirect rule allowed British authorities “to use local Somali chiefs... as the middlemen in the administration” of the colonial state (Njoku 2013, p.57).

Contrary to the British Empire, the motive of Italians to construct a colonial state in south Somalia was driven more by economic interests rather than desire to acquire a strategic base in the Horn of Africa because the Italian government planned to use Somalia as a colony where unemployed Italians could immigrate and also to secure markets in Africa for its manufactured goods (Njoku, 2013). Thus, the fascist Italian government encouraged Italians to settle in the fertile land of South Somalia to introduce “new commercial crops” such as “bananas” which can be exported back to Italy “by Italian companies under a monopoly arrangement”(Lewis 2008, p.30). The policy that Italian government used to rule their colony in Somalia was indirect rule, in which “Italian District and Provincial Commissioners” did the administrative work “through local leaders recognized by the Italians as chiefs”(Lewis, 2008, p.30). But Italy used more aggressive policies than British authorities in the process of colonial state construction in south Somalia because of the desire to “use Somalia as a source of raw

materials for their industries” (Njoku, 2013, p 66). Another crucial difference between British and Italians in the process of colonial state construction was the lack of “intent” by the British to make a formal colony in Somalia while the Italians “did not make any pretense of their intension” (Njoki, 2013, p 66).

The colonization of Africa continued until 1950 when Ghana got its independence from Britain, and more than ten colonial states in Africa became politically independent from colonial rule in the 1960s.(Smith, 2003). Somalia gained its independence in 1960 after British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland united to form the Republic of Somalia (Hesse, 2010). Nationalist movements in north and south Somalia believed that uniting all Somali lands under one government will strengthen Somali state, but “ inter and intra clan competition and strife carried over from the traditional habitual mode of behaviour” undermine the “ real thought” to achieve this goal. (Hashim, 1997, p. 64). To complicate matter, Somali leaders did not inherit solid economic and social institutions from colonial rule that could allow them to build such a State; However, as many other African countries, the post independence period of Somalia was characterized by optimism about the future (Njoku, 2013).

Jackson and Rosberg (1986) argue that in Africa “many so-called states are seriously lacking in the essentials of statehood” because African governments which came to power in post independence period were based on “personal rule” that lack institutional and organizational capacity (p.1). At independence, Somalia inherited “colonial constitutional framework provided for separation of powers and proportional representation”, and political parties that were based on clan alliances (Hashim, 1997, p 61). Similar to many other African post-colonial state, Somali government “is not obliged

to develop politically or economically in order to become independent or to remain independent” (Jackson & Rosberg, 1986, p, 3). For example, before the civil war broke out in 1991, Somali had nine years of “participatory democracy” and 21 years of “scientific socialism” in which corruption and clan favouritism diminished any economic and social development (Hashim, 1997, p.72). During that period Somali rulers did not focus on establishing functioning state institutions and revisit the power structure in the society, but rather continued to use clan politics based on indirect rule they inherited from European powers (Njoku, 2013). I therefore argue that the colonial legacy of indirect rule and institutionalization of clan politics may explain the collapse of post colonial state institutions in Somalia in 1991.

As argued elsewhere, the main motive behind foreign domination in the Horn Africa in nineteenth century was geopolitics due to its strategic location and its importance in the global stage. Similarly, during the cold war, both the USA and Soviet Union campaigned to make Somalia join its alliances with the goal of securing a military base in the Horn of Africa because “even the most cursory glance at the map, shows that Somalia occupies a strategic position of enormous importance”(Fitzgibbon,1982, p.82). As many other post-colonial states in Africa, the legitimacy of the civilian and military governments in Somalia before the civil war depended on “international agreements” rather than the consent of Somali people (Jackson & Rosberg, 1986, p, 3). At the end of the cold war in 1991, the geopolitical importance of Somali diminished and the military government led by Siyad Barre lost foreign support which led to the total collapse of the post colonial state institutions in Somalia in 1991. At the beginning of this century, the importance of the Horn of Africa as a strategic location emerged again because of

America's foreign policy of war on terror. Consequently Menkhaus (2013) contends that, America view the lack of a central government in Somalia as a threat to its national security and interest in the Horn Africa. Thus, America financed African troops to invade Somalia to fight against terror group Al Shabaab and support the internationally recognized government in Somalia. Menkhuas (2013) argues this foreign policy by the Americans is a strategy of restraining terrorist groups rather than helping Somali people to rebuild their collapsed state. Thus, I argue that the current foreign troops under AMISON and the ongoing war on terrorism in Somalia is a continuation of the colonial legacy in the Horn of Africa due to its strategic location.

Over all, the lack of a central government in Somalia can be understand through the analysis of the historical context of colonialism in the Horn of Africa. This essay has argued that the different stages of colonialism in the Horn of Africa reflect the geopolitics of European powers in the nineteenth century. As with other colonized countries, the foreign domination of coastal cities in the Horn of Africa facilitated by lack of state institutions that could defend the Somali nation as whole because each clan constituted its own political unit. The colonial rule of Somali lands in the nineteenth century share indirect rule as a common feature, but Somali people experienced this feature of colonial rule differently because "there were also significant variations" among the colonial powers (Young,1994,p.79). After independence, Somali governments continued the institutionalization of clan politics and the indirect rule that culminated in the civil war and the collapse of state institutions in 1991. The demise of a strong Somali state and the level of violence meted out during the civil war illustrates how the colonial legacy of geopolitics may explain the ongoing war on terrorism in Horn of Africa.

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