

Clan Politics in Somalia: Consequences of Culture or Colonial Legacy?

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Ethnicity as a political identity dominated the political land scape of many post-colonial African countries. The nature of this ethnic politics in Africa is not static, but rather fluid, which is characterized by constant change and evolution (Courtney, 2000). Politics of identity can be defined as “politics of belonging” where ethnic groups form political affiliations that represent their political interests (Joireman, 2003, p.2). As was the case in many other African countries, “clannism” emerged in Somalia after independence; “clanism is the Somali version of ethnic politics” because Somalis belong to one ethnic group which consists of distinct clans (Adam, 1992, p. 12). Leroy (1989), illustrates the intellectual interpretation of ethnic politics in Africa “has been wide” and is based on the historical context of each country (p. 3). Thus, the explanation of “clanism” in Somalia as political identity needs an analysis of the historical context of Somalia. This paper argues that “clanism” in Somalia is the inheritance of both the socio economic context of pre colonial era, and the policies of colonial state, which shaped and influenced the trajectory of politics in Somalia after independence. I will argue that “clanism” is the main factor responsible for the collapse of post-colonial state institutions in Somalia and the ongoing civil war for twenty years. The essay will examine the evolution and the constant change of “clanism” in Somalia since the civil war started and how it is the main obstacle for reconciliation and rebuilding state institutions based on democracy and the rule of law.

Somali people as a nation share one language, one religion and common history, which makes them a unique ethnic group who inhabit a large area in the horn of Africa (Lewis, 1998). Although Somali people belong to one ethnic group, they belong to major clans such as: Darod, Hawiye, Dir and Digil-Mirifle, and each clan “can act as a

corporate political unit, and do tend to have some territorial exclusiveness” (as quoted in Gundel, 2009, p 4). The majority of Somalis belong to clans that are pastoralists and move constantly throughout the year in search of pasture and water. Accordingly, “clan-members derive their identity from their common agnatic descent rather than the sense of territorial belonging” (as quoted in Gundel, 2009, p 4). I therefore argue that a clan as a political unit existed in the cultural context of pre colonial Somalis, while “clanism” is the new form of political identity in contemporary Somali politics.

The most common assumptions about African politics in media coverage is that Africans are tribal by nature, where “tribalism” is a collective irrationality that people inherited from the past (Leroy, 1989, p2). This assumption is problematic because it is against the “empirical evidence” that shows “ethnic consciousness” and its ascendancy in Africa are the result of colonial state policies (Leroy, 1989, p3). In pre- colonial era, the social and the political structure of Somalis was “less hierarchical”, but European colonialism introduced new political and social systems that were more centralized (Samatar, 1997, p. 693). For example, during the pre-colonial era, the chiefs of each clan who were mostly elders had no authority over members of the clan due to lack of institutional power. Furthermore, their positions were “hardly more than an honorific title dignifying a man” (Lewis 1998, p.10). However, colonial agents from who colonized the country from Great Britain and Italy respectively British Somali Land and Italian Somali land institutionalized “clan and chiefs as vassals of their administration” and the function of each chief was to act as the middle men between the colonial state and the members of his clan (Samatar, 1997, p. 693). This creation demonstrates that the institution of

“chieftainship” lacks autonomy and legitimacy because it is not an indigenous institution but rather it is created by the colonial state (Samatar, 1997).

The notion of “Africans were naturally organized into tribes” was popular before nationalist movements gained success against colonialism in 1960s (Leroy, 1989, p1). Historically, clan membership in Somalia was based on “a system of groups linked genealogically by descent through the male line, both dividing and uniting the Somali nation” (Luling 1997, p 289). As noted above, colonial state institutionalized Somali “chieftainship” and legitimized clan as the only political unit to access the colonial state resources (Samatar, 1997). However, as in many other African countries, the consciousness of Somali nationalism reached its highest level when in 1947 the “Somali Youth League, the most durable political organisation in Somali” made clear that its main objective was to unite Somali Nation under one centralized government (Sheik-Abdi, 1977, p.660).

Most African nationalist movements leaders believed that “ethnic loyalties were merely cultural ghosts” and modern citizenship, and the rule of law would replace ethnicity and tribalism once African people got their independence from European colonialism. (Leroy, 1989, p1). However, such optimism did not pan out. As with many other African countries, however, “clanism” as a political identity emerged, and continues in Somalia since gaining independence when British Somaliland and the Italian Somaliland united to form the first Somali Republic in 1960. Historically, the competition and the fighting among Somali clans for scarce resources in a semi-arid land “has been at the level below the clan”, and there was no infighting between the major clans (Adam, 1992, p. 12). But, after independence, “clanism” as politics of identity

emerged, “one manifestation of which is that each clan-family has created its own political party (or parties) as well as armed militias.” (Adam, 1992, p. 12). Therefore we need to examine factors that contributed to the emergence of “clanism” as a politics of identity in Somalia after independence.

There are a range of intellectual explanations about the emergence of “ethnicity” as political identity in many African countries after independence, and one of the popular interoperation is “ that ethnicity is primarily the result of a history of divide and rule tactics” that colonial state employed (Leroy, 1989, p.3). In the case of Somalia, the colonial state in Somalia institutionalized clan as a political unit for accessing state resources, “thereby giving the tribe a real, but spacious identity” (Leroy, 1989, p.3). However, such explanation is limited because there are other African societies that were “tribal” historically and experienced the policy of divide and rule of colonial state, yet are successful in terms of governance since their independence. For example, during the colonial era, people in Botswana were divided into different tribes that share cultural background and “each group was led by a king (Kgosi) who dominated its political affairs”, and as in the case of Somalia, British authorities recognized and institutionalized “Kgosi” (Samatar, 1997, p.668). So why did Botswana succeed to remain stable and practice democracy since 1966 despite its history of “tribalism” as a colonial policy; while in Somalia “tribalism” is the main cause for the collapse of post colonial state? (Samatar, 1997).

As Samatar (1997) argues, the “tribal” factor in both Botswana and Somalia depends on how elite and political leaders of post- colonial state use “tribalism” as a strategy for economic and political power. Contrary to political leaders in Botswana,

Somali elites and politicians who came to power after independence adopted “clanist Identity” as a strategy to remain in power because “clanist tendencies moulded a volatile political and economic environment in which political leaders felt insecure in their tenure at the top of the hierarchy and attempted to exploit it. Consequently, their primary preoccupation was to defend their positions” (Samatar, 1997, p 698). For example, during the parliamentary elections of 1964, Somali elites and politicians organized and established political parties based on “clanist Identity” to get votes from members of their clans. Furthermore, to hold on power, each MP offered an “immediate cash reward” to win for reelection (Samatar, 1997, p 698). Thus, “clanism” as politics of identity in Somalia is not only the result of colonial rule, but also the creation by politicians and elites as a political strategy to gain power.

On the other hand, to explain “clanism” in Somalia as the result of manipulations by elites and political leaders who came to power after independence is not sufficient because this explanation implies that members of each clan have no agency to play their role, but rather they are victims of elite manipulations (Leroy, 1989). Further, such explanation of “tribalism” as politics of identity “fail today to capture why as in colonial period, the ethnic message should find such resonance” with people in African (Leroy, 1989, p.5). Most of the Somali people believe that “clanism” is necessary because “non-clan-based membership” such as civic organizations and trade unions “have yet appeared in the political landscape” of Somalia (Luling 1997, p.289). Accordingly, any Somali politician who wants to participate in the political process must portray himself as an advocate of the interests of his clan (Luling 1997). In keeping with claim above, the

manipulation of politicians may cause “clanism”, but “they would not be able to do this if those ties were not a reality in peoples’ minds and lives” (Luling 1997, p. 289).

In addition, there is a cultural dimension and “primordialist interpretation” that can explain why members of each ethnic group accept and act on ethnicity as political identity in contemporary political landscape in Africa (Leroy, 1989, p. 5). Adam (1992) argues that each clan in Somalia seeks status and recognition through “clanism” in the political environment of the country. For example, members of each clan in Somalia are proud if their members occupy high status positions such as president or other high ranking government officials. Similarly, each clan perceives it as inequality and lack of social justice if one clan dominates high ranking positions in government. As Adam (1992) writes “clan-based alignments have provided the lines of conflict along which struggles for recognition -- for status and prestige but also, and significantly, for social justice and equality -- have been fought” (p 11). For example, during both the civilian and military governments in Somalia “the Darod and Haawiye clan-families competed for government posts” to gain high status (Luling, 1997, p.293). Accordingly, from a cultural perspective, I argue that seeking high status and recognition was the major cause of the civil war among clans that started in 1991 and contributed to the collapse of the post-colonial state in Somalia. Further “clanism” acts as a form of political affiliation and strategy for social justice and equality in the political landscape in Somalia.

At the end of the cold war, ethnicity became “a marker of political affiliation and cleavage” in many countries in the world (Courtney, 2000, p 1). As argued elsewhere during both the pre-colonial and colonial era, clan conflicts among Somalis over scarce resource were at the level of sub clans, but in the post-colonial era, conflict among clans

was at a level of major clans. For example, the Darood clan dominated the political landscape during the military rule through president Siyad Bare until the civil war started in 1991 (Luling 1997). The opposition movements that fought against military rule and later overthrow the Siyad Bare government were also based on major clan affiliations, “but adopted ideological titles in English” such as United Somali Congress (USC), which “represents the Haawiye clan-family”- one of the major clans in Somalia that fought against the government of Siyad Barre (Luling 1997, p.293).

Courtney, (2000) illustrates, that the mobilization of political groups along ethnicity in Africa is characterized by constant “change over time and heterogeneity across space” (p.16). In Somalia, both the Hawiye Clan as the opposition movement against the government and the Darod clan as supporters of the military government “have progressively split and re-split into their component parts” during the civil war (Luling, 1997, p.293). For example, the Hawiye clan (USC),which overthrow the Darod dominated government in 1991 split into two opposing sub clans under the leadership of “General Caydiid’ into Somali National Alliance (SNA), and Cali Mahdi’s Somali Salvation Alliance (SSA)” (Luling, 1997, p. 293). Further, civil war started among two sub clans within the larger Hawiye clan (SNA and SSA) over the control of Mogadishu, the capital city of Somalia after members of the Darod clan fled to the southern regions of Somalia.

As a result, after the collapse of the state in Somalia, “clanism” as political affiliation became less stable due to inter clan conflict over strategic cities and ports among major clans in Somalia (Waal, 1996, p. 5). For example, the major war that happened in Somalia in 1991 was the conflict within the Hawiye Clan in Mogadishu’s

USC. The primary aim of the Hawiye Clan (USC) as political affiliation was to “seize state power”, but when this aim failed, militarization of clans emerged in the struggle for controlling resources and strategic locations in Mogadishu, and civil war started among sub clans within the Hawiye (Waal, 1996, p.5). To demonstrate the evolution of “clanism” as politics of identity and the militarization process of clans after the collapse of state in Somalia, Luling (1997) writes:

In every case where an organisation moves into one or other camp, some of its component clans or lineages, with reasons of their own for dissatisfaction, have split off and joined the opposite one. Hence a double list of initials, for instance USC-SNA versus USC-SSA (p. 294).

Similarly, clans in the northern west regions of Somalia such as Isaak faced fragmentation and conflict “over local resources” after the collapse of State in Somalia. However, clans in the northern west regions of Somalia resolved their issues at the Borama conference after they declared independence from the rest of Somalia and established Somaliland government in 1992 (Waal, 1996). The Darod Clan too experienced inter clan civil war after they fled from the capital city of Somalia. For example, in 1992, power struggles broke out between two major Darod groups in the port city of Kismaayo (Luling, 1997). Furthermore, some Darod sub clans in the northern east regions of Somalia succeeded in establishing an autonomous administration called Puntland during a conference held at Garowe in 1998. Puntland is an administration that is based on both western democracy and traditional laws of clans in that region (Harper, 2012).

Many countries in Africa with high ethnic diversity attempted to incorporate ethnicity as political identity in the process of modern democracy (Courtney, 2000). The civilian governments of Somalia, which come to power after independence adopted “clan-based parliamentary multiparty democratic system.” because they assumed such “model of democracy” would prevent civil war among Somali clans (Ssereo, 2003, p, 37). However, their assumptions were wrong because “clanism” emerged in the political land scape of Somalia and modern democracy failed as result of the domination of certain clans of high ranking positions in government. Ssereo (2003) argues “clan politics” in Somalia is not compatible with the concept of modern democracy, a system based on majority government because “clan-democracy as a conflict regulation framework encouraged a selective application of democratic principles, for example the organisation of elections and the policy of constituency representation” (p. 39).

Clan divisions are entrenched to such levels that all reconciliation conferences to help end the civil war in Somalia that happened more than ten times to try and rebuild modern Somalia based on political agreement between the clans in Somalia, failed. For example, during the last reconciliation conference held in Nairobi in 2002, leaders from major clans in Somalia agreed to build a federal state system based on equal power sharing between major clans in Somalia such as Darod, Hawiye, Dir and Digil-Mirifle (Harper 2002). However, more than ten years after the establishment of the federal state in Somalia, the democratic process has not begun and government officials and parliamentarians are still selected by clan elders. Furthermore, civil war and insecurity continues in many parts of the country. Accordingly, I argue that “clanism” in Somalia as political identity, which has evolved into many stages since the civil wars started is

the main challenge hindering the process of reconciliation and rebuilding modern state institutions in Somalia, based on democracy and the rule of law.

Overall, ethnicity as politics of identity dominated in the political land scape of many countries in Africa since 1960s (Courtney, 2000). Although Somali do not have differences of religion and ethnic groups, clans have contributed to some of the worst violence in the country. After Somalia got its independence in 1960, clan politics in the form of “clanism”, which is the Somali version of ethnic politics emerged because non clan membership of political organisations such as civic organisations “ has yet appeared in the political landscape” (Luling, 1997, p 289). There are many explanations on why “clanism” as politics of identity emerged in Somalia. In this essay, I have examined how pre-colonial context of Somalia people, colonial policy of indirect rule, and elite manipulations of clan politics may explain “clanism” in Somalia. Additionally, I have argued that “clanism” is the main cause of the civil war among Somali clans, which ultimately caused the collapse of the post-colonial state in Somalia in 1991. During the civil war, “clanism” evolved into many forms after major political affiliation as major clans faced fragmentations and constant change. That is why clan politics “clanism” remains the main threat to the reconstruction of the Somali state from the ruins of civil war into a functioning and inclusive federal democratic state.

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