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Education, Peace and Development in Somali Society

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Democracy in Somaliland

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The critical debates connecting democracy, governance and peace-building revolve around a cyclically shifting set of questions. If we locate those questions in the context of 'development' and state formation, they relate to the different forms of democracy, the options available for balancing leadership and clear decision-making against wider participation and the related but different dilemmas around stability, legitimacy and representation within nation-states.

To put that more plainly, much discussion centres on the relative merits of developmental state models, which tend to involve a strong leadership, directing 'development' at the cost of human rights and popular participation. These are contrasted against highly participatory systems that tend to offer great 'legitimacy' through freedom of speech and association on the one hand, but which also have a tendency to short- and sometimes long-term instability on the other. That's a gross over-simplification, of course, complicated for one thing by the fact that the equation tends to change over time - as institutions solidify. It is often possible to shift from a system of stronger leadership to one of greater participation.

The time element makes these trade-offs particularly pertinent in the world of 'development', where nascent states face the immediate issues of security and stability, without which greater participation may prove impossible. There is, of course, nothing 'natural' about the nation-state in which stable and participatory processes must, perforce, be delivered. Meanwhile, the donors who frequently play such a strong role in supporting the process often forget that, in their own countries, the institutions of state were consolidated over extended periods involving battles as bitter and protracted as any that they are now witnessing in the countries in which they find themselves working.

Customary channels for participation are closed in favour of representative systems that rely on election rather than discourse, and where many feel keenly the loss of power as politicians move from their constituent bases to capital cities to conduct their politics, in many cases failing to return regularly, or sometimes at all, to the constituents whom they are meant to represent.

The Somali experience offers particularly pertinent lessons on **all of these** points. Somali society is traditionally highly egalitarian (at least for men from dominant clans), boasting discursive traditions that offer adult males remarkable input

into how their communities are governed. While donors call for 'democratisation', many Somalis see the shift to representative democracy as a process of democratic diminishment. Customary channels for participation are closed in favour of representative systems that rely on election rather than discourse, and where many feel keenly the loss of power as politicians move from their constituent bases to capital cities to conduct their politics, in many cases failing to return regularly, or sometimes at all, to the constituents whom they are meant to represent.¹

Of course, these patterns have led to long-term state failure in what is now meant to be federal Somalia. However, it is in the still-internationally unrecognised northern state of Somaliland where that shift to representative, electoral politics has gone the furthest. Often held up as a corrective to the narrative of state failure in the south, Somaliland's progress has indeed been remarkable. Since their declaration of independent sovereignty in 1991, Somaliland has held a large number of peace meetings and conferences, following a cyclical pattern designed to address local sub-clan grievances first, before progressing to more forward-looking issues of governance, and eventually to state building itself. Those conferences continue to the present day, and offer a formal, customary structure for the continuation of the discursive traditions that have existed for centuries. They have also made possible a series of elections, starting with a constitutional referendum in 2001, and continuing since then to elect the president and local government (twice each), and, in 2005, the lower house of parliament.

In navigating a way along that path, Somaliland have had to address a number of challenges related to the anything-but theoretical concerns outlined above. Elections have frequently been delayed as compromises have been hammered out between clan groups, employing discursive methods to find common ground. That combination of discourse and election has led some to describe the Somaliland state as 'hybrid' (Boege et al. 2008; Walls & Kibble 2010). While that description is valid in many respects, it is also important to recognise just how messy that process is. For outsiders, it has often appeared frustratingly slow, corrupt and crisis-ridden (Crisis Group 2009). Many of the problems that Somaliland faces are deeply-felt and completely legitimate. The decision at one of the big clan conferences in 1993 to go with a strong presidential system with a parliament offering only moderate checks on executive power was hard-argued at the time and continues to generate considerable debate. It relates clearly to the trade-off, referenced above, between leadership and participation.

¹ For more on these processes, see Walls, M., 2014, *A Somali Nation-State: History, culture and Somaliland's political transition* (2nd Edition), (Pisa: Ponte Invisibile/redsea-online)

At the same time, the greater troubles experienced in Somalia to the south, where everything - crisis, international involvement, clan division, conflict - seem to exist on a grander and therefore more intractable scale, serve as a potent reminder of the value of Somaliland's stability. That has led to an often grudging, though so far durable, acceptance of the compromises made to date.

The future has always looked uncertain - that's more or less a truism given the dynamic nature of evolving institutions and the debates that underpin that evolution. Somaliland is currently just about finished with a process of registering voters. It's only the second time voters have been systematically registered, with the last giving rise to the 2009 crisis referred to above. Voter registration is concluding against a backdrop in which discussions between the Somaliland government and the Dhulbahante sub-clans, who traditionally inhabit the eastern region of Sool, seem to be making genuine progress. Some prominent Dhulbahante elders were active participants in the initial meetings that led to the consolidation of an autonomous Somaliland state in the early 1990s. However, since then, the Dhulbahante have drifted away from Somaliland, marginalised by the internecine politics of the dominant Isaaq clans, of which they were not a part. Undecided as to whether their best prospects lay with Puntland, further to the east, with the as-yet fragile federal

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government in the south, or with Somaliland, Dhulbahante groups formed different alliances, including the Khaatumo federal state who mounted an armed resistance against both immediate neighbours, Somaliland and Puntland.

The current talks are between Khaatumo and Somaliland and, if they succeed, will bring Khaatumo into the Somaliland government. Somaliland would be able to claim broad acceptance within the old British colonial borders, and Khaatumo will have direct input into local politics. Pragmatically, it would also boost the governing party's chances of success in presidential elections due to take place in March 2017.

It is rightly impossible to separate the day to day detail from the more conceptual concerns outlined at the start of this article. The struggles and debates touched on so briefly here are illustrative of precisely those changing trade-offs between stability and participation; between representative decision-making and its distant discursive cousin. Future research must continue to seek a better understanding of the societal processes that lie behind the decisions made. The transition so far has tended to consolidate the political power of customarily dominant groups - namely the main clans and men. Women and minority clans consequently face significant practical hurdles that, although often discussed, remain relatively misunderstood. More research in those areas could contribute significantly to the ability to support meaningful progress in redressing the imbalance.

Critically and often inconveniently, better understanding must be rooted in a deep contextual understanding of the myriad variables that affect the process. Somaliland offers a richly rewarding case for combining contextual and theoretical perspectives. As does Somalia in its various parts. However, while each case must be considered in the light of its neighbours, each is also distinct.

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