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## Recreating Political Order: The Somali Systems Today

This paper explores the meaning of statelessness and social contracts, in the context of the territories of the former Republic of Somalia. Too often, observers assume Western philosophy and models of the functioning of the state and society are applicable to Somalis. This paper re-examines those assumptions.

The paper starts by describing the current political systems in the former Republic of Somalia, which consist of four entities: the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia (TFG), Puntland, Somaliland and the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC). Taking Weber's definition of the state, there has been no state since President Siad Barre fled the country in 1991. The territory has been fragmented and dominated by conflict, with most of the country controlled by clan-affiliated warlords and their privately financed militias, backed by big businessmen.

Despite the collapse of the state, anarchy has not taken over. In industrialised states, there are few governance institutions between the individual and the state, which means that if the state collapses, anarchy is a very real possibility. But in Somalia, the reach of the state was never complete and governance institutions that pre-existed it have continued to persist or have been resurrected. They continue to provide a powerful frame for human behaviour.

The seventeenth century philosopher, Thomas Hobbes is often cited in relation to Somalia. He assumed that the universal and primary motive of human beings is personal survival. Rousseau challenged this view, arguing that sociability is fundamental to humanity too. Somalia fits neither philosopher's view perfectly. Evidence from sociologists and anthropologists studying Africa suggests that people seek wealth in order to meet social obligations to their kin and that they use it to purchase status in their communities.

The paper then examines key Somali political actors: clans, rootless young soldiers, warlords, traders, diaspora and Islam.

The clan system of governance, based on Somali segmentary lineage provides a social structure for negotiating relationships and social contracts among groups. At the end of the civil war in Somaliland and Puntland, the creation of new constitutions was negotiated through clans. These contracts were among groups, not individuals, thus

differentiating them from the philosophical foundations of the western liberal state. However, the clans are weak at imposing order, especially on those who are willing to ignore or abuse the system.

Various clans and parties were instrumental in the overthrow of Siad Barre in 1991. Once Barre fled they started fighting with each other for control of territory, particularly major ports, and revenues. Businessmen financed many of these warlords. After years of civil war, many young men are involved in paramilitary activities. None of the Somali political systems are secure enough to demobilise these militias, the upkeep of which requires substantial resources.

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Hobbes argued that the state was a prerequisite to the creation of property and wealth, while Rousseau hypothesised that state were formed in order to protect wealth and inequality. The experience of Somalis has been closer to Rousseau’s expectation. Freed from the regulatory repression of the Barre regime, Somalis have become the dominant traders in the region. Any simple assumption that statelessness is ‘bad for business’ cannot be sustained from the Somali evidence.

The diaspora is another group that, in the context of persistent conflict, has distorted the structure of clan governance, with over half of cabinet ministers in the various Somali governments drawn from the diaspora.

With the clans unable to bring peace in the south of Somalia, in 2006 a new form of Islam, the UIC emerged. The UIC managed to impose greater order than any secular social structure since the fall of Barre. As clans had been transformed into patron-client systems, Islam arguably was seen as the only other force in Somali society able to serve some kind of general interest. Its overthrow by Ethiopia, a predominantly Christian power, was seen as a challenge to Islam, thus merging the potent forces of religion and nationalism.

The paper concludes that the Somali experience restructures much of what we thought we knew about statelessness. It does not automatically mean disorder and is not

necessarily bad for business. However, the longer statelessness persists, the stronger the interests that benefit from it will become. Under extreme stress, even kinship units will erode, leaving them open to manipulation by warlords and businessmen. In this context it will become difficult to mobilise either individual or kinship interests on behalf of state forms of social order, making way for new ideologies that can deliver this promise.

## Credits

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