Meeting Summary

Islamism and Politics in Somalia

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Key Themes

This meeting looked at the role of Islam in Somalia's politics. The speaker briefly described the history of Somalia's Islamic movements during the 19th and 20th centuries, and then analysed the role of Islam in today's politics.

During Dr Baadiyow's presentation and the subsequent Q&A session, three key themes emerged:

1. Islamic movements have a long history in Somalia. It is important to understand current dynamics in terms of trends that pre-date the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 (9/11) and the subsequent shift in external engagement with the region.

2. Given the prevalence of Islam in Somalia, it is unsurprising that Islam has played a key role in politics in south-central Somalia, Puntland and Somaliland. Particularly in Mogadishu, Islamic principles are seen as key both for the leadership of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), and for al Shabaab.

3. Some argued that Somalis must take responsibility for Somalia's political failures during the last twenty years and stop blaming outsiders for the country's woes.

Historical Trends

The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed a period of Islamic revival led by scholars associated with the Sufi Brotherhood movement. Qadiriyya, Ahmadiyya and Salihiya became established as major Sufi Orders. In the 1940s an Islamic consciousness developed and new movements emerged. The Somali Islamic League, established in 1952, was the first effective organisation, reacting to the increased role of Christian missionaries and promoting education in Arabic. From these schools, a new Somali elite educated in Arabic culture was born.

The real Islamic awakening happened after independence in the 1960s and 1970s when educated students from Arab universities carried modern Islamic ideology around Somalia. Small organisations were formed which fuelled the revival of an Islamic consciousness led by modern Islamic scholars.

From 1969, during the period of socialist regime in Somalia, the secular socialist state banned all non-state organisations, including Islamic groups. In 1975 the state approved a law on family life which was seen by scholars to go against Islamic principles. Protests against the legislation provoked suppression of the Islamic movement. Thousands of Islamic scholars fled to

Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Sudan with the aim of starting an organised movement abroad. Somali Muslims who had previously been unified were spread around countries in the Middle East and North Africa, leading to ideological division. When they returned to Somalia in the late 1970s, these scholars brought with them divisive ideology and differing interpretations of Islam.

In 1978, the Islah Movement was born as Somalia's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Al Islah adopted a modern and moderate approach to Islam, promoting peaceful Islamic reforms during the period of dictatorial rule (1969-1991) and civil war (1991-2008).

From 1978 to today, Islam in Somalia has faced three main challenges:

- The geographic context: Somalia has always been a theatre for international presence, and has been affected by British, French and Italian colonisers, the Cold War, international terrorism and piracy

- Instability and regime change

- The divide between the state and society

The modern centralised state which Somalia tries to promote faces conflicting ideologies. The first is a conflict between modernity and tradition. In recent times, Islamic movements have articulated their opposition to a modern state. Second, there is a continuous conflict between Islamism, clanism and nationalism. Finally, there is a conflict between the different ideologies within Islamic society, including Sufism, Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood. The history of Islamic movements goes hand in hand with the history of the state and its collapse in 1991. Extremist movements appeared after 1991, changing the course of Somalia's history. Al Qaeda's involvement began as they sought to exploit the al Itihaad al Islamiya Movement during the civil war, creating an armed group organised around an Islamic and nationalist agenda. When al Itihaad abandoned armed struggle, it left a vacuum for al Shabaab to emerge into, which it did after 2003.

Political Trends

Originally, political parties did not exist in Somalia; only individual participation mattered. In the 1990s, there was a debate on how Somalis should participate in politics. The constitution-making process started with the Djibouti Conference for Reconciliation, also known as the Arta Process, in 2000. Al Islah took part in this national reconciliation process, holding 10

percent of seats in the Arta Parliament, with Islamic interests holding about 30 percent of seats in total. This ended in 2004, as Islamic movements were marginalised in the Mbagathi Peace Process which produced the Transitional Federal Government. In 2009, a resurgence in the dominance of warlords sparked a broad coalition of Islamic interests coalescing in opposition to the TFG through the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). After the resulting struggle for power, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed became President, bringing an Islamist politician into a leadership position for the first time. Al Shabaab refused to join the government, which resulted in Islamic politics becoming key to both the leadership and opposition.

These trends are not unique to Mogadishu and south-central Somalia. Puntland and Somaliland also have similar dynamics.

Conclusion

Political Islam can promote peace in Somalia. The rise of extremist groups and the many Islamic influences demonstrate that the Somali people want an Islamic government. The future state should be democratic, with citizens' rights defended, but the state will have to embrace Islam or Somalia will continue to be unstable.

Q&A

Q: What does Islamism mean to you and what is the common view among Somalis of a modern democratic Islamic state? Should the state and religion be kept separate?

A: Many terms are used to define Islam which makes this a very difficult question to answer. Commentators refer to political Islam, Islamic revivalism and radical Islam, to name only a few. In Somalia there is no concept of a secular state. Religion has to be brought into the state or the state to religion. The Islamic state we are aiming for in Somalia is different from ideologies of Islamism and extremism. There will be a gradual application of Islamic values. Political Islam and the application of Shari'a would safeguard the people, and spirituality is needed because it brings security.

Q: How does al Shabaab change people's behaviour? Does it gain support through fear or because people share its ideologies? What is the best way to address al Shabaab?

A: During conflict the uneducated, unemployed and distressed found something they related to in al Shabaab's message. Al Shabaab provided them with food, training and promised them paradise when they die. To be able to address al Shabaab, the state needs a comprehensive strategy. The use of force will not work completely so there is a need for a new approach.

Q: There was a plan to start a Somali forum of like-minded Islamist organisations. How far did that project go?

A: This has not happened yet. An initiative was planned to bring together three Islamist groups and President Sheikh Sharif Ahmed to discuss the future of the Islamic state. Those involved have decided to broaden the project and widen the platform of discussion.

Q: Looking at the history of Somalia, it seems impossible to stabilise the country by accommodating both clans and Islam. Do you have a vision based on the reality of the importance of clans in Somalia. or is your campaign solely for Islam?

A: Somalia's current reality is the clan system. This system has been strengthened in the last twenty years by Islamic movements. Somalis are all Muslims who want to obey Islamic law. Today, there is a real drive for Islam in Somalia, but the challenge is to create a new state for Somalis to live under Islam.

Q: Ethiopia and Kenya are nervous about an Islamic Somali state. Have you observed a softening in their attitude which might allow for a stable Islamic Somalia?

A: Neighbouring countries are concerned about extremist interpretations of Islam in Somalia, which could create a problem for them. However, if Somalis want to have Islamic principles as a basis for their state, this is not aggressive against our neighbours.

Q: What are your chances of being elected? How would you deal with extremists if elected President?

A: The biggest problem we have in terms of extremists is Somalia's warlords. As a member of the diaspora who came back to Somalia twenty years ago, I worked with civil society organisations to tackle the problem of warlords. Until

9/11, efforts were satisfactory but now it is time to fight our fears and save the country from those who destroyed it.

A comprehensive plan with al Shabaab will be put in place. It is important for al Shabaab to realise that they have to obey the law and the government. An Islamic constitution will have to be implemented for the government to be fully responsible and for the people to comply with the law.

Q: There has always been division amongst clans. Is the solution an Islamic state?

A: Clan issues are not the central problem in Somalia. Keeping clan division in the discourse only increases the scepticism of Somali people. We should find a way to bring all various ideologies together. Our neighbours also have clans, but do not face the same problems.

Q: How does the draft constitution comply with Islamic rules?

A: Somali people are all Muslims and all want to comply with Islamic rules. It is important that the Constitution complies with Islamic laws but also that it enables a progressive adjustment of the state. Islam has to be a reference point for all laws and the adoption of Shari'a will be done step by step. As there is no definite system of governance in Islam, Islamic principles will be progressively included into state law.

Q: How do you deal with the variety of groups currently in Somalia who are acting according to their own interests?

There is a belief that Somalia cannot deal with the current situation itself. However bringing other people in, or blaming external players, will not solve our problems; it will only complicate the process. As Somalis we must take responsibility for our own failures for having created the current environment.

Q: Why do you think that Islamic influences in civil society projects, in the areas of education and social services have been successful?

I have been a member of al Islah since 1982, and we have worked to bring Islam to people through education. Our strategy was to provide social services such as schools, clinics and clean water that would help promote national reconciliation and unity. We tried to find an alternative for civilians

under the influence of warlords and change the system from the bottom-up. These efforts have been continuous for the last twenty years.