



Is Balkanisation the Solution to Somalia's Governance Woes?

By Rasna Warah



When former prime minister Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo was elected president of the Federal Government of Somalia in 2017, many lauded his victory. Unlike his predecessors, Farmaajo was viewed as a leader who would unite the country because he had a nationalistic mindset and was someone who was not influenced by clan interests. Many believed that, unlike his predecessor, Hassan Sheikh, whose tenure was marred by corruption allegations and in-fighting, he would bring together a country that has remained fragmented along clan lines and endured internal conflicts for decades. He was also perceived to be someone who would address corruption that has been endemic in every Somali government since the days of President Siad Barre.

Sadly, Farmaajo's tenure did not result in significant transformation of Somali governance structures or politics. On the contrary, his open hostility towards leaders of federal states – notably Jubbaland, where he is said to have interfered in elections by imposing his own candidate – and claims that corruption in his government had increased, not decreased, left many wondering if he had perhaps been over-rated. Now opposition groups have said that they will not recognise him as the head of state as he has failed to organise the much anticipated one-person-one-vote election that was due this month, which would have either extended or ended his term. This apparent power vacuum has caused some jitters in the international community, whose backing Farmaajo has enjoyed.

However, it would be naïve to assume that Farmaajo's exit is a critical destabilising factor in Somalia, because, frankly, the president in present-day Somalia is merely a figurehead; he does not wield real power. The government in Mogadishu has had little control over the rest of the country, where clan-based fiefdoms and federal states do pretty much what they want, with little reference to Mogadishu. National security is largely in the hands of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces, not the Somalia National Army.

The concept of a state that delivers services to citizens has also remained a mirage for most Somalis who are governed either by customary law known as *xeer* or the Sharia. Some have even argued that with its strict codes and hold over populations through systems of "tax collection" or "protection fees" combined with service delivery, Al Shabaab actually offers a semblance of "governance" in the areas it controls - even if these taxes are collected through extortion or threats of violence.

In much of Somalia, services, such as health and education, are largely provided by foreign faith-based foundations, non-governmental organisations or the private sector, not the state. Many hospitals and schools are funded by foreign (mostly Arab) governments or religious institutions. This means that the state remains largely absent in people's lives. And because NGOs and foundations can only do so much, much of the country remains unserved, with the result that Somalia continues to remain one of the most underdeveloped countries in the world, with high levels of illiteracy (estimates indicate that the literacy rate is as low as 20 per cent). State institutions, such as the Central Bank and revenue collection authorities, are also either non-existent or dysfunctional.

Efforts by the United Nations and the international community to bring a semblance of governance by supporting governments that are heavily funded by Western and Arab countries have not helped to establish the institutions necessary for the government to run efficiently. On the contrary, some might argue that that foreign aid has been counter-productive as it has entrenched corruption in government (as much of the aid is stolen by corrupt officials) and slowed down Somalia's recovery.

Foreign governments have also been blamed for destabilising Somalia. The US-backed Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006, which succeeded in ousting the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) - which had successfully brought about a semblance of governance in Somalia through a coalition of Muslim clerics and businessmen - spawned radical groups like Al Shabaab, which have wreaked havoc in Somalia ever since. Kenya's misguided "incursion" into Somalia in 2011, had a similar effect: Al Shabaab unleashed its terror on Kenyan soil, and Kenya lost its standing as a neutral country that does not intervene militarily in neighbouring countries. Certain Arab countries, notably Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, have also been accused of interfering in Somalia's elections by sponsoring favoured candidates.

All of Somalia's governments since 2004, when a transitional government was established, have thus failed to re-build state institutions that were destroyed during the civil war or to deliver services to the Somali people. In its entire eight-year tenure, from October 2004 to August 2012, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) did not have the capacity to become a fully functioning government, with a fully-fledged revenue collecting authority and robust ministries. Ministers had no portfolios and ministries had skeletal staff. The national army was weak and under-funded, and since 2007, the government has relied almost exclusively on African Union soldiers for security, though some donors, notably Turkey, have attempted to revive the Somalia National Army.

Somalia's first post-transition government was elected in 2012 under a United Nations-brokered constitution. Hassan Sheikh was elected as president with much enthusiasm and in the belief that things would be different under a government that had the goodwill of the people. In his first year in office, President Hassan Sheikh was named by *TIME* magazine as one of the world's 100 most influential people. Somalia expert Ken Menkhaus called his election "a seismic event" that

“electrified Somalis and both surprised and relieved the international community”. However, it would not be long before his government would also be marred by corruption allegations.

What governance model should Somalia adopt?

There has been some debate about which type of governance model is most suitable for a country that is not just divided along clan/regional lines, but where lack of functioning secular institutions threaten nation-building.

Federalism, that is, regional autonomy within a single political system, has been proposed by the international community as the most suitable system for Somalia as it caters for deep clan divisions by allocating the major clans semi-autonomous regional territories. The 4.5 formula for government representation proposed by the constitution based on the four largest clans (Darod, Hawiye, Dir and Rahanweyne) and 0.5 positions for minorities does acknowledge the reality of a clan-based society, but as Somalia’s recent history has shown, clan can be, and has been, manipulated for personal gain by politicians. As dominant clans seek to gain power in a federated Somalia, there is also the danger that the new federal states will mimic the corruption and dysfunction that has prevailed at the centre, which will lead to more competition for territories among rival clans and, therefore, to more conflict.

Several experts have also proposed a building block approach, whereby the country is divided into six local administrative structures that would eventually resemble a patchwork of semi-autonomous territories defined in whole or in part by clan affiliation.. In one such proposal, the Isaaq clan would dominate Somaliland in the northwest; the Majerteen in present-day Puntland would dominate the northeast; the heterogeneous Jubbaland and Gedo regions bordering Kenya would have a mixture of clans (though there are now fears that the Ogaden, who are politically influential along the Kenya border, would eventually control the region); a Hawiye-dominated polity would dominate central Somalia; the Digil-Mirifle would centre around Bay and Bakol; and Mogadishu would remain a cosmopolitan administrative centre.

Somaliland offers important lessons on the governance models that could work in a strife-torn society divided along clan lines and where radical Islamist factions have taken root. Since it declared independence from Somalia in 1991, Somaliland has remained relatively peaceful and has had its own government and institutions that have worked quite well and brought a semblance of normality in this troubled region.

After Siad Barre ordered an attack on Hargeisa following opposition to his rule there, Somaliland decided to forge its own path and disassociate from the dysfunction that marked both the latter part of Barre’s regime and the warlordism that replaced it during the civil war. It then adopted a unique hybrid system of governance, which incorporates elements of traditional customary law, Sharia law and modern secular institutions, including a parliament, a judiciary, an army and a police force. The *Guurti*, the upper house of Somaliland’s legislature, comprises traditional clan elders, religious leaders and ordinary citizens from various professions who are selected by their respective clans. The *Guurti* wields enormous decision-making powers and is considered one of the stabilising factors in Somaliland’s inclusive governance model. Michael Walls, the author of *A Somali Nation-State: History, Culture and Somaliland’s Political Transition*, has described Somaliland’s governance model as “the first indigenous modern African form of government” that fuses traditional forms of organisation with those of representative democracy.

However, Somaliland’s governance model is far from perfect: the consensual clan-based politics has hindered issue-based politics, eroded individual rights and led to the perception that some clans, such as the dominant Isaaq clan, are favoured over others. Tensions across its eastern border with

Puntland also threaten its future stability.

In addition, because it is still not recognised internationally as a sovereign state, Somaliland is denied many of the opportunities that come with statehood. It cannot easily enter into bilateral agreements with other countries, get multinational companies to invest there or obtain loans from international financial institutions, though in recent years it has been able to overcome some of these obstacles.

Somaliland is also not recognised by the Federal Government of Somalia, which believes that Somaliland will eventually relent and unite with Somalia, which seems highly unrealistic at this time. This is one reason why the Somali government gets so upset when Kenyan leaders engage with Somaliland leaders, as happened recently when Mogadishu withdrew its ambassador from Nairobi after President Uhuru Kenyatta met with the Somaliland leader Musa Bihi Abdi at State House. Raila Odinga's recent call to the international community to recognise Somaliland as an independent state has been welcomed by Somalilanders, but is viewed with suspicion by the federal government in Mogadishu

Nonetheless, there has been some debate about whether Somaliland's hybrid governance model, which incorporates both customary and Western-style democracy, is perhaps the best governance model for Somalia. Is the current Western- and internationally-supported political dispensation in Somalia that has emerged after three decades of anarchy a "fake democracy"? Can Somalia be salvaged through more home-grown solutions, like the one in Somaliland? Should Somalia break up into small autonomous states that are better able to govern themselves?

Balkanisation is usually a deprecated political term referring to, according to Wikipedia, the "disorderly or unpredictable fragmentation, or sub-fragmentation, of a larger region or state into smaller regions or states, which may be hostile or uncooperative with one another". While usually associated with increasing instability and conflict, balkanisation could nonetheless still be the only solution for a country that has been unable to unite or to offer hope to its disillusioned citizens for more than three decades.

As Guled Ahmed of the Middle East Institute notes, "the 1995 Dayton accords, which ended the Bosnian war, paved the way for ethnic balkanisation of former Yugoslavia into six countries. This resulted in peace and stability and prosperity. So if Eastern European countries can separate along ethnicism, why not balkanise Somalia with multi-ethnicism just like the former Yugoslavia to achieve peace and stability and fair elections based on one person one vote?", he said.

Ahmed told me that balkanisation would also eliminate Al Shabaab (which has been fighting the government in Mogadishu for the last 14 years) as the independent states created would be more vigilant about who controls their territories and also because people will have more ownership of their government. Somali refugees languishing in Kenya, Ethiopia and elsewhere might also be tempted to finally return home.

Balkanisation can, however, be messy - and bloody. But Somalia need not go down that route. A negotiated separation could still be arrived at peacefully with the blessing of the international community. If the international community is serious about peace and stability in Somalia, it should pave the way for these discussions. Sometimes divorce is preferable to an acrimonious marriage.

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