

Africa Report by Marco Fanini

Revolt in Somalia

Was the assassination of the Italian bishop of Mogadishu, Monsignor Colombo, a plot by Siad Barre?

Spokesmen for the Somalian opposition, interviewed by Italian RAI-TV's Channel 2 News, furnished a surprising but plausible explanation of the recent assassination of the Bishop of Mogadishu, Msgr. Salvatore Colombo. They claim he was killed by secret service men of the dictator Siad Barre, in order to allow Barre to unleash repression and consolidate his failing grip on power.

Bishop Colombo was assassinated in the early part of July. The regime immediately tried to pin the blame on four Muslim clergymen, speaking of "religious fanaticism"; all of this provoked an angry reaction by the inhabitants of Mogadishu, who are almost entirely Muslims, culminating in a demonstration where the police opened fire on the crowd.

The dead are now being counted—at least a thousand according to reliable sources—and cruel repression is being carried out. Opposition spokesmen say that it was Siad Barre himself who sought Monsignor Colombo's murder, as a pretext to unleash the latest wave of repression, and to send a signal to Italy for the latest demand for political support.

Siad Barre is called a "liar" throughout the Arab world, and once his history is known, the opposition's version of the facts becomes credible.

Barre came to power in 1969 with a military coup. He is a policeman of very mediocre education, who was the faithful slave of the Fascists during the war, when Somalia was an Italian colony; later he became the friend of the Italian Christian Democrats; and then

pointman for Soviet penetration into Africa. Finally he became "pro-American" and most recently a friend of Bettino Craxi, the Italian Socialist Party leader who became Italy's first non-Christian Democratic postwar prime minister.

In short, he is a shrewd chameleon ready to change his stripes according to the exigencies of the time. Barre is capable of bloody repression. He has sent hundreds of opponents to the firing squad for the mere suspicion of being against his regime. In 1973 he did not hesitate to become a "Marxist" and carry out blanket nationalizations, but when malcontent rose exorbitantly, he broke with the Soviet Union and invented the Ogaden War (Ogaden is a large Somalian territory given by the British to Ethiopia after the war) to coopt Somalian nationalism and smother any opposition voices.

After Bishop Colombo was killed, Siad Barre made up his latest big lie, saying that the rebels of Mogadishu had joined up with the rebels of the North of Somalia, the Somalian National Movement. Now, this Movement practically controls the North and is a pro-British secessionist operation (the North corresponds to the old British Somalia). With the pretext of a supposed, but nonexistent, link between the Mogadishu rebellion and the northern secessionists, Barre caused hundreds of citizens, whose only crime was having been born in the North, to be rounded up and shot to death.

Padre Salvatore, as Monsignor Colombo was known, was just a mild-mannered missionary, who had lived

in Somalia for 40 years, was known and loved by all, and was completely outside the political games. The regime's propaganda has given credence to the idea that he was killed because he was Italian, a man who symbolized the support which the Italian government has always given unconditionally to Siad Barre.

But the dynamic of the incidents, according to the opposition's reconstruction, excludes any such possibility. It should also be recalled that the Italians, especially since Craxi had roads, ports, and schools built in Somalia, are very well liked by the Somalian people, even though Italy's having always supported the dictator can be expected in the future to lead to criticisms of Italy by the Somalians, who are sick and tired of the regime.

Even from Italy there are signs of perplexity regarding Barre. President Francesco Cossiga and Giulio Andreotti, who has just become prime minister of Italy, refused to go to Somalia during their recent trip to Africa, and only inserted a technical stop-over in Mogadishu at the last moment after repeated insistence from Somalia. It would be hoped that Andreotti, who is supposed to be a good Catholic, would try to clarify the mystery of Bishop Colombo's death; and if the facts bear out the opposition's story, that he won't be afraid to draw the necessary conclusions.

As for former Premier Craxi, he ought to realize that the continued presence of the flaky Barre rules out Craxi's project of a peace settlement between Ethiopia and Somalia. The current weakness of Ethiopia's Mengistu regime, which seems to be losing Russian backing, does mean that a serious economic development policy from Italy could open the way to democratic change and long-term peace on the Horn of Africa, however.