

Ambassador documents the anatomy of political failure in Somalia

A book review by Susan Maitra

The Road to Zero, Somalia's Self-Destruction

by Mohamed Osman Omar
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213 pages

This slim volume is must reading for anyone concerned with the fate not just of the battered and bloody nation of Somalia, or the strategic Horn of Africa, but of the whole of Africa and the world. As Dr. Oboth Okumu, Ugandan High Commissioner to India, wrote about the book: "If only the word Somalia was taken away . . . the contents could be true of many African nations today. The work should encourage all those who read it to contribute to the political histories of their countries." Osman Omar has succeeded in showing us from the inside the step-by-step process of Somalia's descent from the optimistic expectations of independence on July 1, 1960—overshadowed as they already were, however, by the tortured legacy of competing colonial rulers—to the fratricide into which the country plunged with the overthrow of Siad Barre on Jan. 27, 1991.

Osman Omar's direct and unassuming style in these "personal reminiscences" is a refreshing departure from the typical insider accounts of historic events. There is no doubt that throughout the period, as one of the relative handful of educated and qualified Somalis, he had an excellent vantage point on developments. Born in 1937 in Mogadishu, he began work as a civil servant at the Post Office and then transferred to the Constituent Assembly during the preparations for independence. Following independence in 1960, he worked first as a journalist and then as a diplomat in London, Beijing, Teheran, Dar-es-Salaam, Khartoum, and Belgrade, the last two as ambassador. In between, he served a total of six years as chief of protocol in the Foreign Ministry. He is married and has seven children. He speaks six languages, including Arabic, Italian, and Mandarin Chinese.

Presently Somalia's ambassador to India, Mohamed Osman Omar begins his story in Mogadishu in 1950, when we

see through his youthful eyes the transfer of power from the British Military Administration, which had seized this part of the Somalia territories from Italy in World War II, back to Italy, which had been designated by the United Nations to "prepare the territory for independence within ten years." We appreciate the cruel arbitrariness of this exercise—the fourth time in living memory that Somalia's ownership was being changed—in the personal dismay of the young Mohamed Osman, and his apprehension over the loss of his English teacher and his English education, an apprehension fired by his father's stories of the brutality of the rule by the Italian Fascists prior to 1941.

"Now that Mrs. Geeran and what she represented had gone, and the English language was buried, we began learning everything over again, in Italian," writes Osman Omar. "All office correspondence was now to be in Italian. And we were in a hurry, because in ten years time we had to be able to run our country."

The book then gives a retrospective account of the often incomprehensible maneuvering among the world powers of the day, and between them and the nascent political groupings in Somalia itself over U.N. Resolution 289, which determined Somalia's fate, including the country's continued fragmentation. This subject runs as a powerful undercurrent through the rest of the book, and could well be a book or several books in its own right—a case study in the geopolitical gamesmanship that has wreaked havoc with the nation-building effort in Asia and Africa in particular.

The problem is engraved in the flag of independent Somalia and embedded in the Constitution. The flag is a white star on sky-blue background: The five points of the star represent the five Somali territories, namely former Italian Somaliland, British Somaliland (Somali Republic), the French Somali Coast (now Djibouti), the Northern Frontier District (NFD), and the Ogaden, the last two controlled by Kenya and Ethiopia. On July 1, 1960, only the first two were "freed" and united, but the goal of uniting all the Somali territories was enshrined in Article 6 of the Constitution. Unlike in the many cases where colonial rulers enjoyed diverse ethnic and cultural groupings with which to play their game of divide and rule, the Somali territories are uniquely homogeneous ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and religiously.

Yet, years before Somalia's independence, and just after a losing fight against the other major powers for uniting the territories under the Bevin Plan, Britain, between 1948 and 1955, had handed over the Ogaden, Haud, and the Reserved Area to Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. The emperor and his patrons evidently believed that all of the Somali territories belonged to him, and the "Lion of Judah" began military harassment of the young republic soon after independence. Then, in 1963, Britain gave the NFD to Somalia's other neighbor, Kenya, in a high-handed move that betrayed its own referendum findings concerning the NFD population's wishes, and set Kenya and Somalia at loggerheads. In 1967, in a similar operation, France tightened its grip over Djibouti.

Extreme backwardness

This situation would present a formidable challenge to the most experienced national leadership of an otherwise strong and vigorous nation. But at the time of independence, Somalia was a portrait in dependence and backwardness. In 1957, after seven years of Italian-directed preparation for independence, Somalia had only two men under training in the diplomatic field. Just 160 students were enrolled in the Higher Institute of Law and Economics, the only institution of higher education in the Somali Territory, and some 37 Somalis were pursuing university studies in Italy. It was expected that in 1960 a mere 27 Somalis would receive university degrees in Italy.

Moreover, the whole business of the nation was being conducted through the medium of foreign languages—Italian in the south and English in the north—with English required to conduct foreign relations. Lack of educated and skilled personnel made the country dependent on foreign expertise even for the daily running of the administration. And, since throughout the colonial period no effort had been made to improve or build up the country's infrastructure and economic production, dependence on foreign assistance in that sphere too was virtually total. After ten years of Italian tutelage, there was still no potable water in Mogadishu: Drinking water was brought to most households in used petrol canisters on the backs of donkeys, Mohamed Osman tells us. Illiteracy was very high.

The main employer in the country was the government, but the country didn't generate enough revenue even to cover the salaries of its civil servants: The nation's budget was funded by foreign aid, mostly from Italy. There were other foreign aid pipelines, but almost nothing went into economic investment. Osman Omar tells of imported tractors that went to rust because an aid donor convinced Somalia's leaders that "it would be cheaper to import grain from our country than grow it yourself."

Meanwhile, the national preoccupation with uniting the Somali territories received no strategic or material support from Somalia's erstwhile benefactors among the western powers. In 1963, the government of Prime Minister Abdi-

rashid Ali Shermarke rejected a western offer of \$10 million in heavily conditioned military aid in preference for a Soviet aid package reportedly three times bigger. The tilt had no impact on domestic affairs, where corruption, nepotism, and tribalism continued to prosper, and also proved no solution to Somalia's strategic dilemma. Ties with Great Britain were severed and then repaired, but by the end of the decade of independence the goal of reuniting the territories was further away than ever. The population was desperate for any change that offered the hope of improving conditions.

Barre's 'bloodless revolution'

Enter Maj. Gen. Mohamed Siad Barre, leader of "the bloodless revolution" of Oct. 21, 1969, who promised to restore justice and equality before the law, the right to work, fair distribution of the nation's income, eradication of hunger, disease, and ignorance, and elimination of the system of tribalism. Barre's more than two-decades-long rule took Somalia into the Soviet orbit and straight out again, as geopolitical maneuvering erupted anew in the Horn of Africa, and finally brought the nation to its knees. Osman Omar provides windows onto both the international intrigue and the internal workings of the Barre dispensation, from the author's successive diplomatic posts as well as his tenure as chief of protocol in Mogadishu. In particular, the ups and downs of Somalia's liaison with the former Soviet Union are interesting.

The author's dispassionate treatment of Barre brings into focus the general's accomplishments during the first ten years, including taking the difficult decision to give the Somali language a script, and the vigor of the young regime's commitment to the nation's welfare and its participation in African and world affairs. Similarly, the last ten years of Barre's slide into despotism and paranoia comes across starkly, and we are made to ponder the truism that "power corrupts" anew, and consider where the mistakes were made and why.

Somalia is among the ten least developed nations on this planet. The country's plight was virtually unknown in the West until the BBC and CNN brought live coverage of the civil war and starvation into the living rooms of television viewers around the world, and the need for a major rescue operation was recognized. The country had literally reached "zero"—the political, economic, and social institutions that make a nation had been shattered, and the population was threatened with extinction. Somalia has become the most extreme expression of the tragic abortion of the premise of independence and economic development that afflicts much of Africa to date.

Now Somalia needs help—the constructive help of outsiders and, most of all, the informed, energetic, and constructive help of its leading citizens to comprehend the past and chart a path for the future, to rebuild and fulfill the promise of independence for its long-suffering people. *The Road to Zero* is a most valuable contribution in this regard.