

Assessing the Social Tools of Conflict Resolution in Somalia: The Unexplored Role of Somali Clan System

Major General George R A Owinow^{*}, Lieutenant Colonel John Kisilu Reuben^{**}

^{*} Kenya Defence Forces

^{**} Kenya Defence Forces

Abstract:- This paper explores the possibility of using the Somali clan system to counter religious extremism which is currently manifested in the name of Al Shabaab. The paper notes that, the clan is the only known entity in Somalia which had succeeded in forcing Al Shabaab to negotiate for entry into the Somali community. To gain entry and acceptance into the Somali society, the religious extremist groups had to align their agenda with Somali culture. The Somali culture took precedence in case there was a contradiction in the precepts propagated by the extremist groups. This paper alludes to the fact that the clan structure is revered by both the Somali population, political players as well as Al Shabaab in equal measure. Clan elders wield a legitimate authority over their clans. They can enter into an agreement on behalf of the clan, consequently committing the clan members into a particular course. Fighters who are in Al Shabaab owe unshakable allegiance to their clans. In case the clan severs ties with Al Shabaab, all the fighters in Al Shabaab belonging to the clan, defect back to the clan. Clans had played a role in negotiating for release of foreign aid workers captured by Al Shabaab, had negotiated for passage of humanitarian aid into areas controlled by Al Shabaab, the clans had proved capable of protecting their high level defectors from Al Shabaab and within the clan itself, the clan had managed to raise and fund clan militia to provide security for its members in the absence of government security apparatus. This paper proposes the consideration to view Somali clannism positively and as an opportunity which can be utilized in order to defeat the religious extremism and ultimately resolve the protracted Somalia conflict. It is significant to note that the continuous clan feuds witnessed are as a result of individuals of the same sub-clan fighting for political leadership. Some clan leaders practice clan leverage to enhance their political power and wealth. It is pure clan politicization which was used by Siad Barre to rule.

Keywords:- Clans, Religious Extremism, Al Shabaab, Negotiations.

I. INTRODUCTION

Somalia is ethnically homogeneous but beneath the surface deeply divergent along socio-political identities founded on cultural strands within the clan systems which are ignored in conflict resolution forums (Kusow, 2011). In the period preceding colonialism, clan system existed in Somalia. The clans were a unifying factor of kinsmen to protect their common interest in agricultural and grazing land. However, the colonialists used it to divide and rule. Upon attainment of independence, the political players used clannism to foster clan based conflicts (Ahmed, 2020). The Somali clan led by Sayyid Abdul Hassan fought colonialism. All the clans were represented in the struggle, even though the percentage of representation differed. On attaining independence, Siad Barre, in an attempt to consolidate power started clan politicization, by favouring his Merehan kinsfolk. His government largely became a family affair. This stoked other clans outside his sphere to gang up against his regime. They managed to oust him, leaving a vacuum that was filled by clan warlords.

The identity of each Somali, is characteristically defined along clan lines. The clan was a source of protection to each Somali individual. Further, small and weak clans attached themselves to strong clans for protection. This was even quoted in the Somali proverb: *Ama buur ahaw ama buur ku tirso* (Either be a mountain or attach yourself to one). Clan protection substituted the State protection (Gundel, 2009). To claim to represent a clan in Somalia, earns someone political power and resources. This was exemplified in the duality with which the Federal Government of Somalia operated; accommodating clan and state interests at the same time (Musau, 2013).

Though this study recommends clannism to be the solution to the Somalia conflict, the same clannism was noted to be the major local factor exacerbating conflict in Somalia. According to a 2006 World Bank report, many of the factors that drive armed conflict have also played a role in managing, ending, or preventing war. Clannism and clan cleavages had been exploited to divide Somalis, fuel endemic clashes over resources and power, mobilize militia, and make broad-based reconciliation very difficult to achieve. Most of Somalia's armed clashes since 1991 had been fought in the name of clan, often as a result of political

leaders manipulating clannism for their own purposes (World Bank, 2006).

Further, the functionalist theory as propounded by Emile Durkheim (1915), stated that society is made up of interconnected parts that when combined work together to bring about unity and hence maintaining a balanced state as well as social equilibrium in the whole system. In Somalia, clannism had broken the cohesiveness of the Somalia citizens, dividing them into warring factions. As Durkheim and Spencer the proponents of the functionalist theory state, a society is likely to become dysfunctional when different groups don't play their roles as required. In Somalia, clannism had divided the society, making it hard for peace and stability to be attained (Mooney, Knox, & Schant, 2007).

II. METHODOLOGY

This study used historical research design to review the secondary data in electronic and print media about the Somalia conflict from 1991 up to date in order to get an understanding of how the conflict came into being. Further, descriptive research design was used for qualitative and quantitative data in collecting primary data. Focus group discussions, interview schedules and questionnaires were the main data collection methods used. The researcher reached respondents drawn from Somalia civilian, government and AMISOM officials. The study used purposive and snowballing sampling techniques.

III. DISCUSSION

The Dilemma in Negotiating with Terrorists and Religious Extremist Groups

A constant question hanging over conflict management in intra-state conflicts is whether or when to negotiate with extremist groups. In choosing a pathway to negotiation, the government is faced with the classic dilemma in that while negotiation may bring an end to the conflict they may legitimize the extremist group in question and acknowledge the movement's role as spokesman for a part of the population. Negotiation with extremist groups has largely been shunned in national and international conflict management approaches largely rooted in the logic that democracies should never acquiesce to violence. As such, extremist groups should never be rewarded for using it. In this regard, democracies must shy away from negotiating with extremist groups since this will legitimize their course and undermine the peaceful approach to political change. This may further frustrate international efforts to outlaw religious extremism and henceforth open a front for more groups to sprout (Neumann, 2007).

However, crisis negotiation in the wake of protracted conflicts in 21st century conflict zones has witnessed the challenge of addressing terrorists and religious extremist groups. The peace makers are put to task to formulate a method of resolving conflict involving terrorists when states are not in a position to negotiate with terrorists. Further, the setup is conventional - asymmetrical, where the diplomatic

foray uses conventional approach to face amorphous religious extremist group (Faure, 2008).

However, the Somali terrain offers a different extremist terrain. While there is an increasing resort to religious extremism in Somalia, Somalis generally subscribe to a pacifist idea of political Islam. As such, undercurrents of extremism emanate from political feuds that are routinely connected to transnational narratives. As such, the permeation of religious extremist groups in Somalia is a product of the Islamicization of political and economic conflicts, a phenomenon that has been experienced in the Horn of Africa since the late 1990s (Abbink, 2020).

As Abbink (2010) further states, the situation mirrors that of states in West Africa, North Africa and the Sahel region where Islam provides a militant political theology. The militants agenda is propagated by the group to the population by canvassing it with a political theology (Girard, 2004) which after being religiously whipped, takes the form of a radical ideological stance. The state response with use of legal force bestowed upon its military and other security agencies may further embolden the group towards radicalism (Abbink, 2020).

However, even though there has been an influx of Islamic groups espousing religious extremism and violence such as al-Itihaad al-Islami and Al Shabaab, the clan still retains the central role of political and socio-economic mobilization. This explains why while Al-Qaeda was attracted to Somalia, a few Somalis joined its rank and file. Further, the attacks by Al Qaeda on targets in East Africa were by individuals of non-Somali origin. The salience of clans explains why Osama Bin Laden shunned the country as he shifted his base from Khartoum (Elliot & Holzer, 2009). According to Shire (2021), suggestions for negotiations with religious extremist groupings are not new in Somalia. The central government in Mogadishu for instance has been urged to negotiate with the Al Shabaab. However, these have largely hit a snag. At the meso level however, where we have clans, the clans have been holding periodic and ad hoc dialogues with religious extremist groups either as parties to local level conflicts. The viability of clans negotiating with religious extremist groups is hinged upon the fact that clan elders have been for years the credible societal mediators possessing locally sourced legitimacy and perceived integrity, a phenomenon that gives them the capacity to help overcome the stalemate between religious extremist groups and the central government in Mogadishu (Shire, 2021).

The Social Realities of the Clan System in Somalia

The dilemma and inability of state organs to overtly engage religious extremist groups in negotiation in order to resolve a conflict requires a creative approach. In this regard, the utilization of the clan institution is one key factor that could open the locked door to negotiating with religious extremist groups in Somalia. In order to front a negotiation that is hinged upon a solid understanding of the socio-political realities underpinning the Somalia conflict zone, a need is there to examine the politico-economic factors from

historical perspective. Advancing the case for new approaches, Owinow and Reuben (2021) argue that the Somalia problem is a function of a multiplicity of political, economic, religious and environmental causes. As such, with the failures of current methods largely employing Western conflict management templates, there is a need for an overhaul of the existing peace processes with an emphasis of a peace process which is a hybrid of top-down and bottom-up approaches to ensure lasting peace in Somalia (Owinow & Reuben, 2021).

Since time immemorial, clannism in Somalia had been institutionalized. Clan identity was a source of pride especially if you come from the major nomadic pastoralists clans of Hawiye, Darood, Dir and Isaaq. Clan alliances and affiliations are formed to safeguard common interests and protect members of the alliances against being affected by aggression from stronger clans (Musau, 2013). Ahmed (2020) further cements the argument by observing that clan factor had been a phenomenon characterizing socio-political life in Somalia even before colonialism in the late 19th century. Clan elders provided leadership in all spheres of life. Elders exerted massive influence by providing leadership to the Somalis. The objective being to bind kinsmen and form a formidable force which could defend clan resources (Ahmed, 2020).

To Dirshe (2013), even though there has been a myriad of factors that have united the Somalis beyond clan factor including that of belonging to one ethno-linguistic community, the larger Somalia, as well as subscribing to the same religion, Islam, over time, clannism has overtaken all of the above and became the main uniting and dividing factor. Clans in Somalia are a patrilineal consensual identity that is inherited from patriarchal ancestors. On the other hand, clannism is a political ideology that determines the socio-economic and political issues bedeviling Somalia including competition, access, retention and consolidation of power, distribution of resources and values, expansion of territory to various sub-groups as well as the recruitment to positions of influence (Dirshe, 2013).

In Somalia, the significance of membership to a clan and to a majority one for that matter cannot be gainsaid. Ever since the conceptualization of the Somalia community as a decentralized society, the clans have been playing a critical role at the micro, meso and macro levels of society. After the collapse of the central government in Mogadishu following the ouster of the then strongman, Siad Barre in 1992, clans in Somalia have morphed into the sole and exclusive provider of a wide variety of public goods in the absence of a functioning state. Moreover, clans in Somalia have become the primary source of an individual's security, social standing, judicial redress and economic opportunity. According to Lewis (2004), clans in Somalia evolved out of the decentralization of governance in Somalia. As a result, this heralded the emergence of a genealogical kinship traditional system in which Somalis would be able to manage their social relations. Given the long-standing sense of belonging to the clan that Somalis have cultivated over

the years, Lewis (2004) further contends, the clan identity has evolved into clan-nationalism (Lewis, 2004).

The collapse of the state of Somalia in 1991, led to a gradual shift to the clan institution as a source of public goods for the population. Additionally, clannism became the political ideology that determines the socio-economic and political issues bedeviling Somalia including competition, access, retention and consolidation of power, distribution of resources and values, expansion of territory to various sub-groups as well as the recruitment to positions of influence (Dirshe, 2013).

The significance of Somali Clans in conflict management

One of the ways the clan has been critical is its role in peacebuilding. This has taken the form of a clan-based power-sharing model dubbed the 4.5 model. Designed as an inclusive approach to governance, the use of the clan-based power-sharing model has served Somalia's political culture and ideology and functioned as a mechanism to work toward political stability. As such, it has become a focal point for matters of governance and leadership including in socio-economic issues to political participation and power-sharing (Ahmed, 2020).

Power sharing among clans in parliamentary decision making and resource distribution processes was necessary in the initial stages of state building and had been heralded as a harbinger to potential positive upshots. By incorporating the clan system through the use of Somalia's 4.5 formula in the allotment of parliamentary seats, there had been a significant potential in bringing legitimacy to the state structures of Somalia due to the fact that it dealt with the question of representation in a way familiar to most Somalis (Greene, 2011).

Somaliland, a breakaway state that adopted multiparty system about two decades ago, has clan fibre integrated within the political and multiparty system. Even though Africa ails from tribalism and identity politics, what is unique to Somalia, however, is that clan stands above the state. In other words, the state and its institutions are intrinsic part of the clan system. Further, the parties draw their supporters, candidates, and fundraising through clan channels. This cements the clan ownership of the political systems (Ahmed, 2020).

The clan has been the most powerful institution to the extent that even the terror group, Al Shabaab, which has never engaged in talks or negotiation with government representatives or civic organizations, has time and again engaged in talks or negotiation with the local clan elders (Abbink, 2020). This is largely predicated on the fact that in the Somali society, religion is a "veil lightly worn" and is readily accepted among the Somalis to the extent that it blends well with local culture and clan loyalties, or to the extent that it supports with the overriding anti-foreign sentiment. Moreover, Somali Imams often don't speak or read Arabic. As such, currents of transnational Islamic thought do not permeate Somali culture easily. This creates a two-pronged intervention platform. On the one hand, clans

can be used in neutralizing religious extremism and religion-inspired terrorism (Bruton, 2011).

In addition, clan structures will be critical in engineering the Somali society into a post-conflict society using a bottom-up approach. Since clannism is the only mobilization technique Somalis have ever known in times of conflict, during political campaigns and when a collective need arises (Ahmed, 2020), such an institution has the critical energy for a building block approach to peace. It is also worth noting that when the Somali society is bedeviled by natural disasters like drought, famine and floods, clans are an essential element of Somali identity because it fills the role of strong government institutions. As such, clans can be used to build bottom up governance institutions.

According to the World Bank (2006), traditional clan elders, participate in conflict mediation, using clan-based customary laws which serve as the basis for negotiated settlements, and clan-based blood-payment groups serve as a deterrence to armed violence (World Bank, 2006). Clans have been critical in the application of track two diplomacy in Somalia as clan elders have been critical in reaching out to marginalized groups in their specific region. This has been pivotal in fostering the reconciliation necessary to build trust and cooperation between the state and the society (Greene, 2011). Furthermore, clan elders have forged mechanisms centered on representation as a fulcrum of peacebuilding and conciliation. This has resulted in a strengthened connection between institutions of governance and the people.

With further support, clans can be critical in further bridging the gap between the state and the society by introducing reporting mechanisms for outreach. In Somaliland for instance, clans have conducted outreach trips to the region in order to build consensus on key political milestones for the government. In the Southern region of Jubaland, a Juba reconciliation conference involving among other sub-national actors, clans arrived at a consensus on the creation of a regional administration (Gateretse & Buzanski, 2014).

According to Greene (2011), this can also be seen in the inroads made by the civil society in integrating the social structure of the Somali state forged along the traditional modes of identity i.e., the clan system and Islam as overriding religious order. As such, majority of Somalia's sustainable peace building efforts have tended to focus on the institutionalization of peacebuilding in Somalis socio-economic and political organizations in a manner geared towards ensuring the integration of the two defining identities of the Somali state i.e., clannism into working relationships geared towards peace through vertical integration measures at the local, regional and national levels. Furthermore, these peace building policies have been designed to contribute to the long term goal of a national Somali identity capable of horizontal integration to forge a common unity transcending clan and religion by bridging societal divisions (Greene, 2011).

Shire (2021) postulates that clan elders play the role of peacemakers and respected mediators. They intervene in a case when there is a conflict between a particular religious extremist group and the local population. The clan intervention can include protection of their member who is a high-level defector from the religious extremist group. The clan mobilizes its militia to protect the individual from the reprisals from extremist group. The clan elders can negotiate release of foreign aid workers kidnapped by the extremist groups. Further, the clan elders can negotiate access of humanitarian aid into areas controlled by the extremist groups (Shire, 2021).

The role of clan elders in mediating in conflicts, is a social responsibility but not a job. The responsibility is bestowed upon them by the Somali social structure for the wellbeing of their communities. This has been seen over time in Somalia with the involvement of clan structures in arbitrating conflict and upholding agreements critical to the legitimization of the clan system and institutions (Bruton, 2011). Further, clan elders have authority inherently bestowed upon them when they are chosen to represent their clans. They are empowered to make and enforce agreements while holding their kinsmen accountable for their transgressions (Shire, 2021).

The legitimacy and authority of clan elders is recognized by Al Shabaab. In 2014, Al Shabaab reversed a decision of excluding clan elders in their governance structure after realizing that they needed support from the population. They also recognized that for their governance to be legitimate and accepted, it had to take on board the existing clan system of governance. In this they had to award the clan elders the respect and recognition in the governance of the population which was due to them in accordance with local somali culture and practice (Shire, 2021).

Hassan (2012) puts forward that fighters owe their allegiance to their clan more than the Al Shabaab. If a clan has severed ties with Al Shabaab, fighters from the clan in question will choose the clan and defect from the religious extremist group. Alternatively, the clan forces fighters to quit the group. In this regard, clan politics are a critical consideration for fighters than a religious extremist group (Hassan, 2012).

Role of Clan Militias in the fight against Al Shabaab in Somalia

In Somalia, the local population had little or no trust to the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) security organs. They perceived the security organs to be a grouping of clan militia for the individuals serving in the government. In this regard, the expected security service from the government, for the common good of all the citizens was not available. The security units in Mogadishu displayed loyalty to their own clan and community interests other responding to their respective chains of command. Resultantly, clan elders and local communities had bolstered their own clan militias as protection (Felbab-Brown & Hadad, 2020).

As was alluded to by one focus group discussion;

...Clan is the single most important entity in Somalia which has so far, successfully resisted Al Shabaab. In Hiraaan, Mudug, Galgaduud and Middle Shabelle regions of Somalia, clans had empowered Macawisely clan militias to face Al Shabaab in battle and often times inflicting mass casualties on Al Shabaab. The Djibouti contingent in AMISOM, had supported Macawisely with ammunition in order to fight Al Shabaab. This had reduced Al Shabaab dominance in those areas.

The lack of commendable progress in building state's security capacity and institutions, calls for the need to utilize the existing local security arrangement within the clans. As the clan is the only entity so far with the reputation to force Al Shabaab to negotiate, it can be empowered to vanquish the religious extremist group. This can help to build a strong society (Felbab-Brown & Hadad, 2020; Skjelderup, 2020). According to Reuben, et al. (2021), the success of the bottom-up approach was in the utilization of the available resources at the Federal Member States(FMS), this included the integration of clan militia to be part of the regional forces in the fight against the religious extremist groups. To Reuben, et al. (2021), the successful formation of Jubaland was attributed to the integration and utilization of the available security forces who became very instrumental in the fight against Al Shabaab (Reuben, Lutomia and Kimokoti, 2021). These sentiments are echoed by Williams (2012) who argue that there should be a gradual shift from degrading Al Shabaab towards a broader stabilization agenda. Such a broader stabilization agenda should espouse a national consensus with all parties to the Somali conflict with emphasis on building reputable governance structures supported by hierarchical set of institutions at Federal Member States and Federal Government levels. These institutions should include clan militia who should be the locus of securitization at the micro and meso levels (Williams, 2014).

The idea of clan militia to protect clan interest can be traced in Somalia during the colonial period. In the contemporary dispensation, a strong central government that provides security as a common good to all the regions is practically not viable. There is vast ungoverned spaces that organised Armed Groups (OAGs) dominate. The ultimate cooperation between the regular security forces and other forces (militia) at all levels involving the local population is highly desirable. All this can be integrated into a system envisioned as Total People Defence. The key ingredients for this idea being security, governance and intelligence. In this concept the local clan militia can be brought into the formal security architecture and empowered to function as any other security apparatus working in support of the government.

IV. CONCLUSION

Somalia has been bedeviled by a protracted conflict that has ravaged the Horn of Africa country for the last thirty years. Now into its fourth decade, the conflict's end doesn't seem to be in the horizon. This calls for new approaches to conflict resolution in Somalia. As the article suggests, effective strategies to conflict resolution in Somalia should be based on an empirical understanding of the socio-political realities underpinning the Somali conflict terrain. In countering religious extremist groups, the clan has proved capable of forcing Al Shabaab to negotiate at the local level. As such, there is a need to utilize the established Somali clan system and structures to bring all the belligerent groups, including the religious extremist groups to the negotiation table. Al-Shabaab has never been given a chance to sit on the negotiating table in the search for peace in Somalia. This could be attributed to the state-centric approach adopted by the Federal Government of Somalia(FGS) and her international supporters, which does not accommodate negotiating with extremist groups. Therefore, through the use of the powerful somalia clan system, an opportunity can be seized to engage Al Shabaab in getting the solution to the Somalia conflict. Even though as Ogbaharya (2008) opines, there could be a challenge in incorporating informal systems wholesomely into the state governance structures after the conflict has been resolved (Ogbaharya, 2008). It is worthy to give it a try, to utilize clan power and influence, to find a solution to the protracted Somalia conflict.

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