

SOMALIA: *Plus ça change...?*

RICHARD CORNWELL

As the year 2005 began, the collapsed state of Somalia at last showed faint signs of recovery, fourteen years after slipping into its deep coma and after thirteen failed attempts at revival. Not surprisingly, this development drew considerable media attention, prompted too by the evident relief of those who had toiled so hard to achieve this breakthrough.

The question now is when the resurrected government of Somalia can reduce its dependence on its external life-support systems and assume a measure of responsibility for what happens in Somalia itself. It is evident that these are early days, and that even partial recovery will have to be followed by a prolonged and carefully monitored convalescence. Therefore, the willingness of the international community to expend the necessary care and attention on this frail patient is also at issue.

There are also clear signs that the deeper malaise of the Somali body politic remains deeply rooted, in that the country's new parliament has already ignored important provisions of the charter under which it was constituted, and that it has also clashed with the president it elected, ostensibly over procedural matters.

For those with any familiarity with Somali history, this was perhaps to be expected, in that only under the dictatorship of Siad Barre had the independent state been strong enough

to manage the turmoil of Somalia's clan-based factionalism, and then at such human and material cost that none would wish to use this as a template for the future. In any event, Barre's appalling regime was maintained by the largesse which Cold War donors lavished so cynically on Somalia, and any new government will have to learn to survive on much leaner rations.

Whether these truths have yet fully dawned on the Somali leaders who concluded their protracted deliberations in the relative comfort of Eldoret and Mbagathi will become apparent only when they have to return home to confront the physical hardships of their own war ravaged cities and towns. A glance at even the most recent diplomatic history of the Somali peace talks would suggest that the country's aspirant rulers have a steep learning curve to master if they are to fulfil the promises they have made.

Let us now turn to review the salient points of the last year, in the belief that this may temper our expectations and suggest the shape of some of the problems that may lie ahead.

By the beginning of 2004 protracted attempts to reconstitute some kind of state authority in a united Somalia appeared to have foundered on the implacable self-interest of the myriad factions represented at the peace talks in Kenya and the individual agendas of their regional backers. By this time the negoti-

ations, sponsored by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), had seen the principal Somali participants divide into two competing and unstable alliances. The first of these centred around the Transitional National Government (TNG), established following Djibouti's initiative at the Arta conference in 2000, which had seen the formation under the presidency of Abdiqassim Salad Hassan of a Transitional National Government (TNG). Ethiopia, one of the three IGAD states charged with directing the peace process (the others being Kenya and Djibouti) had spurned what it depicted as a puppet of Djibouti and its Arab League allies, and in March 2001 had cobbled together a rival alliance of factions with the optimistic title of the Somali Reconciliation and Reconstruction Council (SRRC), which dedicated itself to undermining the TNG.

The subsequent failure of the TNG to extend its authority much beyond a handful of city blocks in the capital Mogadishu and its reliance upon *shari'a* courts to maintain a modicum of law and order in its bailiwick had provided its opponents, regionally and abroad, with plenty of ammunition. Nevertheless, so desperate were many in the international community to find something in Somalia that could be passed off as a positive conclusion to a series of attempts to recreate central government following the collapse of the state in 1991, that the TNG was often accorded far more prestige in the negotiations than its accomplishments warranted.

By 2003, however, the Ethiopian gambit was beginning to pay off. The SRRC was built up around a number of warlords and other faction leaders who had managed to establish a degree of control over areas of the old Somalia. Principal among these men was Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, who had been elected as president of the autonomous Somali state of Puntland upon its formation in 1998, a post he retained by force of arms after electoral defeat in 2001. Ethiopia had backed its diplomatic efforts by supplying aid and arms to its Somali allies and occasionally deploying forces across the border to curb the activities of Islamicists, whom it accused of supporting

Oromo and Ogadeni dissidents within its own territory. This campaign, which sought to associate the TNG with a radical Islamic programme in Somalia also succeeded in winning the support of important Western countries.

Ethiopia hoped to find other building blocks for its imagined federal Somali state in the Hiraan and Bay regions, and in Somaliland, which had declared its independence in 1991, and continued to refuse all attempts to involve it in the reconstitution of the Somali Union formed in 1960. Despite its subsequent formation of a government and administration, Somaliland has so far failed to gain international diplomatic recognition, though its accomplishments have been widely acknowledged. The tacit and sometimes explicit inclusion of Somaliland in the notional reconstructed Somali state remains a major problem for international and regional actors, since any attempt at annexing it to a new Somali Union would precipitate violent resistance.

However grandiose Ethiopia's schemes may have seemed at first, by September 2003 it had manoeuvred its clients into a position of ascendancy in the negotiations in the Nairobi suburb of Mbagathi. A Transitional Federal Charter was adopted and the SRRC seemed to have emerged the winner, causing Djibouti to withdraw from the talks. But by the end of 2003, tactical clumsiness and the warlords' eager pursuit of the individual spoils of office had given Abdiqassim's rump TNG a new lease of political life. Ethiopia now withheld its support, and only the SRRC's withdrawal from the negotiations and the threat of restarting another peace process inside Somalia forced a rapid reconsideration on the part of the IGAD partners.

Within a few months, the international donors, who had financed this exercise, exasperated by the inability or unwillingness of the conference delegates to adhere to agreements they had debated and even signed, were wondering what return they could expect on the investment they had made on the talks. Their impatience was becoming almost tangible, and this, together with the Kenyan government's desire to bring down the curtain on

the diplomatic circus, seems to have moved the IGAD states to adopt a degree of common cause to find some resolution, however tenuous this might prove.

The full re-engagement of Ethiopia in the IGAD process and the broadening of the direction of the conference effectively broke the deadlock, initiating a period in which the SRRC and the TNG eventually agreed to an ambiguous and loosely redrawn Transitional Federal Charter, which would pave the way for the election of a new Transitional Federal Parliament (TFP), which in turn would elect a President, to serve for a period of five years.

Further delays followed as the process of selecting members of the transitional federal parliament (TFP) was disputed among the conference delegates. Eventually compromises were reached and by the end of August 2004, most of the 275 MPs had been sworn in, still in Nairobi.

The constituent members of the SRRC now recognised that the advantage lay firmly in their hands and there were few observers who were surprised, therefore, when on 10 October 2004 Abdullahi Yusuf emerged as the new transitional president, following an election by the TFP in which Ethiopian influence was apparent.

Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda immediately pledged their support to the nascent administration and urged its prompt return to Somalia to begin its work of reconstituting the state. The governments of Djibouti and Egypt were less enthusiastic, and Somaliland was profoundly disturbed by the election of a man whose Puntland administration had long expressed belligerent claims to parts of the regions of Sool and Sanaag. Fresh outbreaks of fighting between Puntland and Somaliland forces around Las Anod emphasised the importance for the international community to make assistance and recognition for the new Somali government conditional upon the exercise of restraint in its relations with the established, and functioning, authorities in Hargeisa.

As it is, Abdullahi Yusuf's government has so daunting a task ahead of it that few would give it much chance of achieving its ambitious

goal of restoring law and order to the south and centre of the country. Indeed, the first task it faces is to begin returning the instruments of government to the national territory itself. This is an uncertain enterprise, not least because of Abdullahi Yusuf's perceived dependence upon Ethiopia and his role in accelerating the demise of the Mogadishu based TNG. His choice of a Mogadishu civil society activist, Ali Mohammed Geedi, as his prime minister was calculated to mollify some of the feelings in the capital against the new administration.. The inclusion of a number of Mogadishu warlords in the new cabinet also aimed to achieve the same effect. But the principal positions in the 91-member cabinet have gone to warlords and others closely associated either with the President or the SRRC.

At present then, the government of Somalia coalesces around a group of faction leaders and warlords whose control over the national territory is constantly under threat from inter and intra-clan fighting. The transitional charter requires that the armed Somali factions now hand over their weapons to the new administration. It also demands the surrender to the authorities of control over the ports and airports that constitute the principal source of their revenues. Yet all the faction leaders realise that their individual position in the government is effectively based on their retention of independent sources of patronage and power. Until such time as Abdullahi Yusuf's administration can demonstrate convincingly that it is going to be effective, there will be little to convince its members to comply individually with the charter's requirements.

Lacking both money and the armed force to relocate itself in Somalia, let alone enforce its writ over the national territory the new government immediately made an appeal for massive international assistance. Abdullahi Yusuf, admitting that his administration lacked means to tackle the problems of reconstruction and restoration of state authority, called on the international community to set aside \$15 bn for the purpose. In addition he asked for a force of up to 20,000 troops to protect his government on its return to Somalia and to assist in the business of disarmament.

The broader international community responded with what was effectively an embarrassed silence. Only the African Union showed any inclination to make a favourable response, largely due to the insistence of the IGAD states, particularly Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. There was nothing the AU could do by way of providing financial help, but it undertook to consider providing a military force, initially to monitor the uncertain peace and subsequently to protect a Somali government that Kenya was only too eager to see leave Nairobi.

Where the funds and the soldiers for such an expeditionary force are to be found remains to be seen. It seems that the AU realises that without some sort of practical

assistance the new government will remain stillborn, and that only if a start is made with the restoration of state authority will international donors reconsider their position.

Nonetheless, this is an enterprise fraught with danger. Islamicist leaders have warned that the deployment of any foreign forces on Somali soil will be regarded as a hostile act. It is possible that such an event could gain converts to the radical cause, which already feels itself threatened by Abdullahi Yusuf's accession to power under Ethiopian patronage.

For the moment the old SRRC alliance is held together by a patronage that has yet to make material returns to its members. How long will patience hold? How will the transition from private to public interest take?