



POLITICS NOW

A Somali Spring?

Prospects for a post-transition Somalia

Key points

- The so-called Arab Spring is not an appropriate analogy: there was no single authority to bring down and there was no popular uprising.
- The election of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud as President of Somalia was the culmination of a Somali-owned process and showed that the people of Somalia were eager for change.
- Military success against al-Shabaab does not mean that violence is over or that governance in the areas now under the control of the Federal Government of Somalia will be straightforward.
- International partners should be ready to allow Somalis to take ownership of peace-making processes and stop dictating policy from outside.

Introduction

More than 200 people attended the first event of the Rift Valley Institute's Nairobi Forum on 11 October 2012. 'A Somali Spring? Prospects for a post-transition Somalia' featured four speakers:

Kenneth Menkhaus Professor of Politics at Davidson College in North Carolina;

Amal Ismail Founding publisher of *The Bridge* magazine;

Jabril Abdulle Director of the Centre for Research and Dialogue in Mogadishu; and

Matt Bryden Former Chair of the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea.

The event was chaired by the Hon. **Mohamed Abdi Affey MP**, former Kenyan Ambassador to Somalia, who opened proceedings by outlining his experiences, positive and negative, as a negotiator in various peace initiatives. He described how, on a recent trip to Mogadishu to present a letter of congratulations to the new president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, he had escaped death in an Al Shabaab suicide attack. 'Today,' he said, 'we have a unique opportunity to find stability and peace in Somalia. The question is: are we prepared, not only as citizens of Somalia but also as members of the international community, to seize this moment?'

Prospects and challenges

Each speaker was invited to give an assessment of Somalia's prospects following the election of Hassan Sheikh as President in September 2012. Their appraisals ranged from 'guarded optimism' to 'worry and concern'. A key point of agreement was that, despite the title of the meeting, the events in Somalia, while significant, could not be likened to the so-called Arab Spring: there was no single authority to bring down and any change that had been achieved was not a result of a popular uprising. But the speakers agreed that Hassan Sheikh's election arose from a Somali-owned process, albeit one that emerged from a UN-managed transition. From a Somali perspective, the speakers agreed, the election of a person of peace who had never resorted to armed violence, was of especial significance because it demonstrated to the world that Somalis were eager for change—and that they were not innately violent people.

Among the large number of serious challenges facing the new government and Hassan Sheikh's leadership, the speakers identified these issues as paramount: managing public expectations, laying out a hopeful path, and demonstrating an immediate impact. They agreed that the international community needed to give the government space to establish its priorities and timely support, while avoiding any political interventions that might incentivize armed groups. Speakers emphasised that women and youth had long been marginalized by conflict and state collapse, and their active involvement in the rebuilding of the country should therefore be a priority.

Experience in peace-building

Ken Menkhaus said that the election of Hassan Sheikh represented the best opportunity Somalia has had in 20 years—while noting it is also a high-risk moment, beset with challenges. The process leading up to the presidential election, he said, had been improvised and rushed, with the TFG required to complete tasks that it had failed to manage in the previous seven years in just one. Although the UN had shepherded what he called an 'appointocracy'

into power (as had happened in Iraq), a surprising amount of civic mobilization had taken place. Hassan Sheikh was backed by a civil society and private sector network, as well as popular support, giving Somalis ownership in the process.

Some people, he said, are worried that neither the President nor the parliamentary speaker have experience of running a government. But he noted that they are experienced peace builders, negotiators, and civil society activists. The President's own background, Menkhaus added, showed that he knew how to work across conflict lines. As the nature of Somali politics changed 'from bullet to ballot', he would be preoccupied with negotiations and with building a culture of trust. 'If he can export this approach to other parts of the country, he will be a game-changer.'

Menkhaus sounded a warning about likely trouble ahead. As armed conflict decreases, he argued, Somalis can expect to see a rise in political violence, meaning that some individuals and groups in Mogadishu will be less safe. Still, these would be problems born of progress. They were likely to include power struggles over a new government and control of the state; a difficult debate over federalism; the governance of areas 'recovered' from Al Shabaab; land disputes, particularly in the context of returnees; and, with piracy diminishing, the movement of criminal activities onto land.

Somalis, he concluded are 'sick of jihadism, sick of warlordism, and sick of the international community'. Negotiation would be fundamental to any expansion of the new government's authority—and the international community would have to provide it with clear space to undertake this, with peacekeepers and private security forces supporting the gradual expansion of government authority.

Amal Ismail spoke passionately about the way that women and young people in Somalia had been marginalised in both public and private sectors for far too long. These two important groups, she said, continue to face many difficulties—and the challenge for the new government is to build a society in which women and youth are given opportunities to play a role in local government, in the rehabilitation

of Mogadishu and in rebuilding the country. Above all, the international community must invest in education. 'Somalia,' she concluded, 'needs to get its youth back.'

'Get out of the bunker'

'I worry. I am scared. I am concerned,' said **Jabril Abdulle**. The good news, he said, was that, on 10 September 2012, a man without a pistol had become president. But what some were calling a 'Somali Spring' was in reality more like a 'parliamentary summer'. There was no popular uprising, no single authority against which to rise up—and some regions did not even celebrate the election result. Jabril's

sense of optimism was tempered by caution: he was unsure whether Hassan Sheikh could succeed; both he and the Prime Minister were lacking in experience and dependent on technocrats for effective delivery; and the Somali political scene was unforgiving. In this respect, he believed that Hassan Sheikh had just 60 days to deliver tangible results or he would be branded a failure.

However, Jabril did see rays of hope: of the new MPs, 56% are graduates, 40% are from the

diaspora, 45% are new to parliament, their average age is 45-50 years old—effectively a new leadership generation—and the new Speaker does have experience of government. But the president's generous mandate stood in contrast to his meagre resources. Hassan Sheikh's immediate challenge is to manage public expectations and lay out a coherent vision. In terms of short-term impact, dismantling the system of financial mismanagement would be a clear sign of progress—but the government has no money or time to learn, and there is a risk that political institutions will continue to be dominated by personalities. The audience reacted with amusement

when Jabril quoted a Mogadishu newspaper headline: 'Losing presidential candidates return to their countries'.

In his final comments, Jabril turned his attention to the role of the international community. Practical steps need to be taken immediately, including moving the coordination mechanisms that run aid programmes in Somalia to Mogadishu itself. Somalis should be running them in Somalia, he

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argued, with international observers where necessary. International agencies would win more hearts and minds if they allowed Somalis to be custodians, not merely recipients: 'Get out of the bunker, stop writing projects in Nairobi and telling people what to do!'

'Scent of rains coming'

The final speaker was **Matt Bryden**, who agreed with earlier scepticism regarding parallels with the Arab Spring. Searching for a better weather analogy, he suggested there just might be a 'scent of rains coming'. More importantly, he focused on three areas where liberation, akin to the liberation from dictatorial rule 22 years ago, is still needed: from Al Shabaab, from what he called the 'captive state', and from perpetual transition.

Liberation from Al Shabaab, he said, should be the simplest to achieve, because it is 'a broken movement'. Even, he argued, in rural areas, where it was sometimes claimed it was still running an effective insurgency. Al Shabaab might, however, become more active in the north, while leaving cells in the south, carrying out targeted killings, and establishing better links in Tanzania and Kenya. Al Shabaab had profited from genuine grievances, so the government's first task was to practise inclusive government and give those with grievances a real place in the national process.

By 'captive state', Bryden explained that he meant the 'all or nothing' politics of Somalia, in which an absence of functioning state institutions had led to capturing the state being the only way to influence outcomes. The UN Monitoring Group on Eritrea and Somali, he said, had identified three symptomatic problems: the sale of national ID documents; investment in piracy (and then asking for international aid to fight it); and the exploitation of civilian IDPs as a way of attracting foreign assistance, which could then be stolen. Key elements in resolving this crisis of state collapse would include a true separation of powers, an independent judiciary, and a transparent investment climate.

In conclusion, Bryden turned to the issue of transition. In this respect, he said, the vast majority of tasks charged to the TFG remained unfulfilled. Priority questions that need urgent resolution include meaningful debate on political organisation, including federalism; drawing internal borders; formulae for regional power sharing; civic and political rights; and a new electoral system. 'Unless such transitional tasks are tackled,' he argued, 'the transition will be perpetual.'

Questions from the audience raised further questions: whether Somalia is indeed in a 'post-transition' phase; the problem of Mogadishu 'sucking in' both resources and international attention; the future relationships between Somalia, Somaliland and Puntland; Al Shabaab's connections with militant groups in neighbouring countries; the future role of international forces (Kenya, AMISOM, and Ethiopia); whether the UN Strategic Review should be delayed; the impact of a possible mass return of refugees and IDPs; and the number of women in parliament.

A 45-minute podcast of A Somali Spring? is available on the Institute's website: www.riftvalley.net.



Credits

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