The Wars in the North and the Creation of Somaliland

Having enjoyed relative peace and stability since it unilaterally declared independence in 1991, Somaliland’s state-making project has been accorded the status of ‘Africa’s best kept secret’ (Jhazbhay, 2003). Past attempts to disclose its mystery referenced processes of ‘traditional reconciliation’ (Bryden, 1995; Jhazbhay, 2007; Walls, 2009), ‘grassroots democracy’ (Adam, 1995; Othieno, 2008; Forti, 2011), the combination of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ forms of governance into ‘hybrid political orders’ (Böge et al., 2008; Renders & Terlinden, 2010), and its overall peaceful nature (Othieno, 2008). These narratives of Somaliland’s state-making have not only led to the assertion that the polity’s state development was unique (Hoyle, 2000; Kaplan, 2008; Jhazbhay, 2009), but culminated in the erroneous contention that throughout its process of state-making “[n]o civil war occurred” (Sufi, 2003:285).

Yet, Somaliland’s trajectory was not as benign as has frequently been claimed. Not only did its state-making project witness serious traits of authoritarian governance, but it was also marked by episodes of large-scale violence – both prior and subsequent to its unilateral declaration of independence in 1991. While it has been recognized that the struggle of the Somali National Movement (SNM) against dictator Mohamed Siyad Barre during the 1980s was foundational for Somaliland (Huliaras, 2002; Spears, 2003; Bakonyi, 2009), there is reason to argue that also the ‘war projects’ undertaken by Somaliland President Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal in the early to mid-1990s were constitutive of the polity’s state-making endeavor.

Besides challenging the prevailing reading of Somaliland’s state-making history and accounting for some of its bellicose elements, the argument presented in the subsequent paragraphs also speaks to the wider theoretical debate on war and state-making (see e.g. Mann, 1988; Tilly, 1992; Kaldor, 1999; Leander, 2004). While Tilly’s dictum that “war makes states and states make war” (Tilly, 1992:67) needs to be further disaggregated, I propose that the violence in Somalia’s north and the creation of Somaliland allow to argue that war may remain an important component for state-making in contemporary Africa (Herbst, 1990, 2000; Deflem, 1999; Niemann, 2007).


Scholars such as Prunier (1990/91), Compagnon (1990, 1998), Marchal (1992, 1997), Bakonyi (2009), and Spears (2010) have significantly contributed to our understanding of the early organization of violence and the dynamics of war in Somalia and Somaliland. However, the connection between the decade-long civil war of the 1980s and Somaliland’s state-making endeavor remains under researched to date, not least because most accounts of the polity’s state-making project commence their analysis with the polity’s de facto secession in 1991 at the very earliest. Yet, glossing over the bellicose decade preceding Somaliland’s formal creation is not only problematic empirically, but also conceptually, as it silently subjects to the neo-liberal proposition that war constituted nothing but ‘development in reverse’ (World Bank, 2003; Collier, 2004).

After Somalia had lost to Ethiopia in the Ogaden War of 1977/78, armed resistance against Barre’s rule took root. Officially pronounced in London on April 6th, 1981, the SNM was one of the first rebel groups to form, finding its base amongst the Isaaq clan family. Seeking alliances with other clan militias, the movement waged a guerrilla struggle in the country’s north-west, aiming to overthrow and replace the military government. In the wake of the dictator’s defeat and particular developments unfolding in 1991, the SNM decided to abrogate the union of 1960 and declared the Republic of Somaliland an independent state.

The decade-long armed struggle contributed in several ways to the argument that Somaliland is “very much a product of war” (Spears, 2004:185). For one, the war constituted the birth certificate of Somaliland, as without the military defeat of Barre, it would have been highly unlikely that the polity of Somaliland would have been established in the first place. Thus,
competing (sub-)clan militias started clashing over control of resources throughout the country (Renders & Terlinden, 2010).

Second, the war also left important political and institutional legacies. The *guurt*, or ‘council of elders’, which has frequently been identified to lie at the heart of Somaliland’s alleged state-making success (Renders, 2006; Höhne 2006; Glavitzka, 2008; Moe, 2009; Richards, 2009), is, after all, a creation of the SNM and a direct outcome of the war (Interviews 4, 34, 36, 75, 103). It was created by the young officers who had deserted the Somali National Army for the SNM and who had little knowledge about how the clan system worked (Interviews 103, 113, 135) in order to instrumentalize the ‘traditional authorities’ to help mobilize resources and adjudicate disputes (Adam, 1995; Interviews 4, 36; Compagnon, 1993; Brons, 2001). Although having been a much more unintended and problematic product of the civil war (Interview 113) than attested by some (see Bradbury, 2008:69), it had a major impact on Somaliland’s state-making project (Interview 4).

Third, the war aided the formation of the Somaliland polity by contributing to the development of a nascent national identity, which is indispensable for state-making to succeed (Lemay-Hébert, 2009; Balthasar, 2012; see also North, 2005). Committing itself to sharia law and deciding to rename its fighters *mujaheedeen* (‘holy warriors’; Bradbury, 2008:64), the SNM set itself apart from other armed movements and nurtured a particular identity. By furthermore suffering mass atrocities and reviving the narratives of colonial and cultural differences between north and south Somalia, the struggle “played a crucial role in the formation of a strong sense of identity – at least for the majority of its population” (Huliaras, 2002:174). Thus, the “[w]ar shaped the ‘imagined community’ that later proved essential in providing a government apparatus with the moral basis needed to ensure the willing participation […] of its citizens” (ibid.:159; Omaar, 1994:234).

‘War Projects’ as Tools of State-Making: Somaliland’s Large-Scale Violence in the 1990s

Mass violence continued to shape Somaliland’s state-making endeavor once it had officially broken away from Somalia on May 18, 1991. In fact, the early to mid-1990s were marked by such levels of violence and insecurity that interim President Abdirahman Ahmed Ali Tuur and United Nations special envoy to Somalia, Mohammed Sahnoun, agreed to have 350 peacekeepers deployed to Somalia’s north-west (Renders, 2006). While the troops were, ultimately, not dispatched as Sahnoun resigned from his post and Somaliland managed to broker a peace by itself, it shows that the young republic had hit rock bottom in 1992 and came close to all-out civil war in subsequent years.

Once the interim government under the leadership of President Abdirahman Ahmed Ali Tuur was installed, contestation about the allocation of political, military and economic resources started taking root. The ensuing civil strife largely pitted the SNM’s ‘civilian’ and ‘military’ wings, which had emerged during the decade-long liberation struggle, against one another. Whereas the former was mainly comprised of intellectuals who had proclaimed the formation of the SNM in London and Jeddah in 1981, the latter largely encompassed military elements who had started the armed resistance on the ground (Interview 113). While enjoying the backing of the ‘civilian wing’, Tuur was eyed with suspicion by the more hardline military elements, referred to as *Calan Cas*, who were in charge of the most potent SNM militias.

In the absence of a binding, centralized command over the different SNM militias, security regulation was a hard nut to crack and the government’s authority was largely confined to Hargeysa, (Gilkes, 1993; Spears, 2010) resting on those armed units under command of some of the individuals belonging to the new government (Reno, 2003). Tuur’s attempts to establish state-owned security forces provoked tensions within and outside of his administration, and resulted in violent clashes in Burco in January 1992, which left 300 dead. In March 1992, this was followed by large-scale violence in Berbera, when the government attempted to secure the port and its revenues, which had come under the control of the Issaq sub-clan of Iisa Muse that opposed the Garhajis-dominated Tuur government, militarily. The subsequent eight months of “extensive death and destruction” (Renders, 2006:207) resulted in presumably 1,000 individuals losing their life (Bradbury, 2008).

Throughout 1992, security continued to deteriorate (Flint, 1994), as every clan established its own militia, turning Hargeysa allegedly more insecure than Mogadishu (Interview 63, 76, 108). With the government far from dominating the means of violence, competing (sub-)clan militias started clashing over control of resources throughout the country (Renders & Terlinden, 2010).
During this interim period between 1991 and 1993, governance issues were largely left in the hands of other actors, such as the Calan Cas and 'traditional authorities', and, in terms of state-building, came to be considered "two wasted years" (Gilkes, 1993).

At the Boroma Conference in 1993, «Tuur» was replaced by Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal as President. While received wisdom has it that the guurti selected Egal in a smooth process on May 5, 1993 (Bradbury, 2008), it was, in fact, the Calan Cas who propagated him in a prolonged tug-of-war. To the military hardliners Egal appeared to be the ideal candidate, not least because the Calan Cas believed that they could easily manipulate and rule through him (Interviews 14, 143). Yet, during subsequent years, Egal applied shrewd, authoritarian politics and witingly instrumentalized different factions against one another, not least to free himself from the tight grip of the Calan Cas and contain the powers of the 'traditional authorities'. Thereby, he did not shy away from instigating two significant civil wars in order to consolidate his power and drive the state-making project forward.

The decentralized character Somaliland had taken during the 1991-93 period constituted a key structural challenge for the young polity and its potential to establish stable state institutions, largely because it favored a situation, in which multiple political actors contested economic and political power. Thus, it was little surprising that, shortly after Egal took the reins of power, the supporters of the previous government went into an opposition as strong as the one that the Calan Cas had posed to «Tuur». Aggrieved by Egal's choice of ministers and his increasing centralization of control over financial and military means, some of the most prominent Garhajis – made up of the Habar Yonis and Eidagalle – leaders gathered in the vicinity of Burco in July 1993. During their 'Liiban Congress I', the burgeoning opposition announced that they were not bound by the laws of Somaliland (Bradbury, 2008) – and even declared Somaliland's government illegitimate one year thereafter (Spears, 2010; Garowe Online, 2007).

Hence, Egal sought to dispense of this opposition that challenged the government's authority and constituted a political thorn in the President's flesh. Equally, however, Egal also wanted to liberate himself of the grip of the Calan Cas, whom he felt being hostage to. As one observer put it, "[i]n 1993, Egal was not a leader, he was a guest" (Interview 142). Being well aware of the historical tensions between the Calan Cas and the Garhajis, who had been side-lined by the former during the 1993 Boroma conference, Egal had politically accommodated the SNM hardliners at the expense of the Garhajis, thus fuelling the friction, leading some to argue that "Egal intentionally ignited the conflict – it was really obvious" (Interview 142). Ultimately, two Eidagalle militias, into whose territory the Hargeysa airport falls, took control of it in the summer of 1994.

Although political issues lay at the heart of the dispute, it also carried economic connotations (Interviews 19, 36), as by taxing and harassing commercial and aid flights, the Garhajis militia interfered in the business of the Habar Awal entrepreneurs living in Hargeysa, who were crucial to Egal's ability to establish and maintain government capacity (Bradbury, 2008). Thus, in many ways, the challenges Egal faced resembled the conflict «Tuur» had fought in Berbera two years earlier. Rejecting calls for another national conference to resolve outstanding issues, Egal unleashed his eager military officers onto the opposition in November 1994, with the stated aim of securing the airport. Having tasted blood, the government forces led by Minister of Interior, Muse Behi Abdi, and Vice-President and Minister of Defense, Abdirahman Aw Ali – both of whom were staunch members of the Calan Cas – proceeded to attack the Eidagalle village of Toon.

Conflict spread to Burco, when government troops tried to take control of Habar Yonis checkpoints in the city's vicinity in March 1995. Giving the military leaders plenty of rope and portraying the war effort as an 'Calan Cas project', the President managed to wash his hands of responsibility (Interview 14). The resulting war sparked the heaviest fighting since the anti-Barre struggle in which as many as 4,000 people lost their lives, and up to 180,000 fled to Ethiopia (Bradbury, 2008). Although this act of aggression rallied the Garhajis even more against the government, it was functional for Egal. For one the 'war project' allowed him to annihilate the organized Garhajis opposition and further debilitating it by bribing certain of its leaders. For another, having been able to portray the war as an act of the Calan Cas, Egal succeeded in politically delegitimizing them (Interview 14, 107, 108, 116).

While Somaliland was in shatters, Egal emerged from these wars not only as winner, but in a strengthened position. Assuring himself of the support of the guurti, whom Egal convinced that the Calan Cas constituted a threat to peace in Somaliland (Interview 112), he incrementally sacked Calan Cas individuals from their ministerial positions, replacing them either with individuals from smaller clans, 'traditional leaders', and/or members of the Garhajis (Interview 7, 108). In order to deprive both the Garhajis leaders as well as the Calan Cas commanders of the ability to contest his political maneuvering militarily, Egal accommodated their rank and file by turning them into presidential guards. This not only served the purpose of removing the support base of his competitors, but also signaled other militias that it paid to belong to the state. The conflict was followed by the shrewdly engineered 1996 Hargeysa Summit, which served Egal to consolidate rudimentary state institutions.

Concluding Remarks

While neither a necessary nor sufficient condition, the diverse episodes of mass violence appear having been instrumental for state-making in Somaliland. Although the SNM-led struggle did not exactly produce the outcomes Tilly describes for historical
Europe – i.e. a tight administration, coherent army, etc. – it has been considered “formative in creating a ‘political community’ of shared interests” (Bradbury, 2008:50) and perceived as having served as a “cruel university in the arts of political mobilisation and popular leadership” (Bryden, 1999:137). Similarly, also the post-1991 civil wars are thought having “served to consolidate public support for the territory’s independence and to strengthen central government” (Bradbury, 2008:123), leading Huliaras (2002:159) to conclude that “[i]n sum, as happened in the case of medieval Europe […] warfare had played a central and indeed essential role in the process of nation-formation in Somaliland.”

Hence, war can be constitutive of state-making processes, even in sub-Saharan Africa and in the present day. While war is surely neither a panacea nor an ‘angel of order’, in historical and macro-societal terms it appears to be more than a mere ‘daemon of decay’, or, as Enzensberger has it, a “political retrovirus […] about nothing at all” (ibid., 1994, as in Cramer, 2006:77). Thus, the central question appears to be less whether, but rather what kind or components of mass violence can be constitutive of state-making, or under what condition war may enhance rather than inhibit state-making. Thereby, a key aspect seems to be in how far a particular war contributes to or precludes the standardization of commonly accepted institutions and identities amongst a territorially defined population. In contrast to south-central Somalia, the violence in Somaliland seems to have established at least a modicum of such common institutions and identities.

**Bibliography**


Notes:

[1] For a more elaborate account of the effects of the civil war on Somaliland's state-making project, see Helling (2009).


[3] For a more detailed account on the wars of the 1990s and their effect on Somaliland's trajectory, see Balthasar (2013).

[4] See e.g. the case of Puntland, which "was unaffected by the civil strife that accompanied the collapse of the Somali state" (Battera, 2003:230), but nevertheless formed a similar polity.
Somaliland is part of Somalia and the larger Horn of Africa region. It has hundreds of miles of coastline along the Gulf of Aden to the north, and it borders Ethiopia to the south and west and Djibouti to the northwest. Puntland, a semiautonomous state of Somalia that lies due east, disputes some of Somaliland’s territorial claims. Since the creation of a continental bloc in 1963, there have only been two widely recognized border changes in Africa: Eritrea’s split from Ethiopia in 1993 and South Sudan’s independence in 2011. The creation of western-style government institutions has been unsuccessful in Somalia. This is a direct result of colonial administrations not laying the proper foundation for western government institutions to achieve legitimacy in a culture of clan and kinship based identity. In post conflict Somalia the top down approach to state building has been ineffective and a lack of government structure at the time of independence created an environment in which clan based fracturing of the government was inevitable. The heritage of war and state collapse in Somalia and Somaliland: Local-level effects, external interventions and reconstruction. Third World Quarterly, 20 (1), 113-127. North, D. (1990). Institutions, instructional change and economic performance. New York: Cambridge University Press. Historically, Somaliland (North) and Somalia (South) were colonized by British and Italy respectively. Somaliland got independence on June 29, 1960 and unified with Somalia on July 1, 1960 to form the Somali Republic. The majority of the inhabitants of Somaliland (if we discount Sool and Sanaag provinces) belong to the Isaaq tribe. In the rest of Somalia, Isaaqs form a minority. The early 2000s saw the creation of fledgling interim federal administrations. Following the end of the TFG’s interim mandate the same month, the Federal Government of Somalia, the first permanent central government in the country since the start of the civil war, was formed and a period of reconstruction began in Mogadishu.