



Afyare Abdi Elmi. Understanding the Somalia Conflagration: Identity, Islam and Peacebuilding

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Afyare Abdi Elmi. *Understanding the Somalia Conflagration: Identity, Islam and Peacebuilding*. London: Pluto Press. 2010. Pp. xviii + 193. Hardback £ 54.00. Paperback £ 16.00. ISBN: 9780745329741

This book is worth reading for at least two main reasons. First it offers an insider's point of view since Professor Afyare Abdi Elmi, though educated in Western universities, shares and conveys Somali culture and values, in other words Somali identity. Second, because the author not only deals with the features of the Somali war, but he also discusses its possible solutions.

By adopting a social constructivist approach, Elmi underlines that Somali identity is defined by two key characteristics: Islamic religion and clan affiliation. Whereas the former being a homogeneous trait of all the Somali nation has a unifying character, clanism has quite the opposite effect, because it tends to divide Somalis into sub-national entities.

After a brief historical overview of post-colonial Somalia, the book mainly focuses on the post-Barre era and on the role the two above mentioned forces, Islam and clanism, played in shaping the conflict. Elmi specifies that, contrary to what is usually thought, Somalia did not completely develop a national identity during its post-colonial history, and that up to now ethnic and religious homogeneity have not been sufficient, by themselves, for a national sentiment to arise.

This twofold identity plays a role that cannot be underestimated in understanding the Somali conflagration. While on the one hand efforts towards peace and state-building in Somalia cannot be abstracted from clan identity, they also have to take into account the recent Islamic awakening on the other. Elmi does not consider the idea of a federative Somalia as a viable solution because of the presence of deeply-rooted clans in the region. In fact, in his opinion, his country does not have the capacity to organize various administrative levels, from local to national government, especially because "each clan wants to maximize its share". At the same time, if Islam is a common trait which might prove useful in the building of a Somali national identity, its fundamentalist expression is perceived as a threat by the international community.

As previously stated, a reason for reading Elmi's work is the fact that he does not limit his analysis to the problems, but puts forward concrete proposals to try and solve them. In particular, the author suggests a national government with a parliament divided in two chambers, one composed of clans' representatives and the other including members elected according to geographical or demographically-based methods.

However, this institutional proposal is not sufficient on its own as it requires the support of institutionalized forms of peace and citizenship education. In Elmi's perspective, peace as mere absence of conflict is not enough to create lasting and stable security conditions in Somalia, but it would require civil society to play a more participative and active role. In fact, in a war-torn context such as the Somali one, formal education only has limited power and therefore a limited role in shaping people's identity. That suggests, Elmi argues, that we also need to look at informal education processes as means of building a durable peace.

Indeed, the author conveys a particular point of view on this problematic issue: not only does he identify with Somali culture, he also supports a specific hypothesis. Elmi favours a reconciliation process which may lead to the birth, once and for all, of a Somali national identity, while opposing the fragmentation of Somalia's territory. In fact, that would allow centrifugal and selfish interests to prevail, and in the final analysis, result in the weakening of Somalia's role in a regional context. In other words, in Elmi's opinion a division of Somalia into two or more new nation-states would mean favouring dissolution rather than reconciliation, and allow conflict to spread rather than peace.

Such a strong personal perspective does not invalidate the objective value of Elmi's research, which results in a coherent, well-structured and clearly argued work. Throughout the chapters of his book, Elmi quotes opinions of various Somalis he interviewed in order to corroborate his hypothesis. Although his use of primary sources obeys to a more journalistic than essayistic methodology, nonetheless the rich bibliography demonstrates Elmi's interdisciplinary approach to the matter, making extensive use of secondary sources, with references going from the US policy in Somalia to peace-building education, from governance and government to conflict studies.

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