SOMALIA: LITTLE HOPE FOR PEACE

The upcoming presidential election and establishment of a new government should mark the official end to Somalia's transition period. It will not, however, mean an end to Somalia's conflict and chronic humanitarian crises. The transition has been marked by the same challenges as previous peace processes and has failed to address the deep-rooted causes of the conflict. External involvement, driven by various agendas, has resulted in a rushed process. Peace is unlikely to come from such a top-down approach and may rather lie in a bottom-up approach that builds on the elements of Somalia that are working.

Delegates of the constituent assembly meet in Mogadishu, 25 July 2012.   REUTERS / Ismail Taxta

Is Somalia, often referred to as the archetypal failed state, turning a corner? The appointment of a new parliament and the forthcoming presidential election, currently foreseen for 10 September 2012, mark the culmination of the latest push for peace in a country most commonly associated with conflict, lawlessness, and recurring humanitarian crises. Somalia has been largely without a functioning central government for over 20 years since its military dictator was overthrown in 1991 and the country descended into civil war. Only breakaway Somaliland and autonomous Puntland have enjoyed some degree of stability since. Numerous local, regional, and international efforts to broker a solution have foundered.

September's presidential election should mark the official end of the so-called "transition period" that began with the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) established by the Djibouti agreement in 2009. The TFG was a government in little more than name. It drew its legitimacy in large part from the backing and recognition it received from international actors, particularly Western donors. For most of its tenure it was unable to exercise control over more than a few blocks of the capital city Mogadishu as it fought an armed opposition in the form of al-Shabaab ("The Youth"). This al-Qaeda-affiliated militant Islamist group is seeking to establish a unified Islamic state in Somalia. With military support from African Union (AU) troops and parallel military interventions from Ethiopia and Kenya, the TFG has made gains over the last year but the conflict is far from over. Al-Shabaab continue to control large portions of southern Somalia and to carry out regular targeted bombings and shootings in the capital.

Beyond the conflict's current manifestation as a confrontation between a Western-backed government and an armed Islamist opposition, the underlying causes of Somalia's instability are a more complex mix of challenges to be found at local, regional, and international level. Although the political transition may be nearly complete and the new Somali federal institutions established, the process has been neither democratic nor inclusive. Reaching a solution that enjoys the legitimacy required to end the conflict and address many of the underlying challenges will require further effort and new approaches.

Two decades of political instability

The 1990s were characterised by a brutal and bloody conflict but by the 2000s the level of violence had dropped and some elements of stability emerged. As clans fractured and local clan leaders began to reassert some of their traditional authority, clashes became more localised and reduced to the sub-clan level. Businessmen withdrew their support from warlords as their interests began to shift towards legitimate businesses that required some degree of stability. Local Islamic courts established themselves and enjoyed widespread support because of the degree of law and order they were able to introduce.

A political alliance based on the courts, called The Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), emerged as a political force, opposing a coalition of US-backed warlords and eventually taking control of Mogadishu and large parts of Somalia in 2006. The UIC's reign

was short-lived as US-backed Ethiopia, uncomfortable with an Islamist government next door, invaded the same year. The UIC government fell and was replaced by the TFG which had been constituted but powerless since 2004. Ethiopia remained in Somalia until the Djibouti Agreement of January 2009 when it was replaced by an AU force. Following its defeat, the UIC had split. While some elements were eventually co-opted into the new TFG established by the Djibouti Agreement, the more hard-line elements, including al-Shabaab, emerged as a formidable opposition force and the conflict evolved into its present form.

Over the last two decades there have been around 16 internationally-sponsored peace processes, as well as numerous local ones. The latest push for peace began last year when the international sponsors of the TFG made clear that its time was up. Originally scheduled to serve until 2011, the TFG's mandate was extended to summer 2012 due to a lack of progress on the goals set down for the transition. In September 2011 a roadmap was drawn up setting out the steps necessary to end the transition and establish a new government before the expiration of the extended mandate. A series of meetings in Somalia and the wider region, backed up by international conferences in London and Istanbul and strong international pressure, ensured that progress on these steps (drafting a new constitution, appointing a constituent assembly to nominate a new parliament, appointment of a new speaker and new president by the new parliament) was made. Yet, even if the transition period is now officially nearly at an end, the challenges to stability remain.

Problems at home

A number of these challenges are factors intrinsic to Somalia. A relatively ethnically and religiously homogenous society, the Somali population is strongly divided along clan lines. There are five major clans which themselves are broken down into sub-clans and sub-sub-clans although exactly where dividing lines are drawn is flexible. This fluidity of structure, with access to resources and power being an important incentive for clans to fracture, has been an enduring challenge for peace negotiations which have tried to ensure fair representation along clan lines.
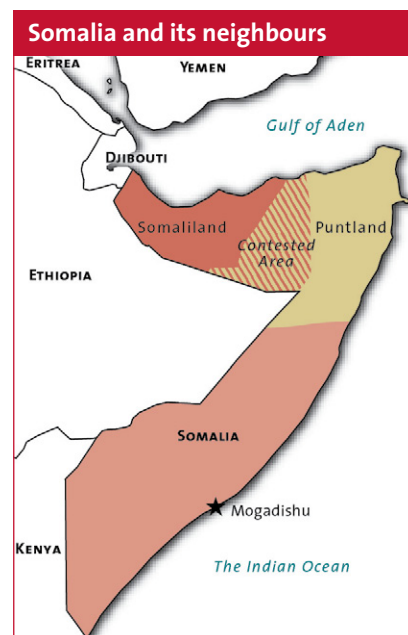
Beyond the clan issue, there are disagreements about the nature, or even desirability, of the state. Much of Somali society has

traditionally been nomadic and suspicious of the interference of a central authority in their affairs – a sentiment reinforced by experience of military dictatorship. The major clans favour a federal solution where distinct units of the country would be largely autonomous and federated into a loose nation state, thus giving them control over a unit of the country. The difficulty is defining these units in a way that addresses the concerns of smaller clans and minority groups who fear being disadvantaged by such an arrangement. This approach is also opposed by others, such as al-Shabaab, who say they want to reduce the importance of clans and emphasise a common Muslim identity for all based around a unitary Islamic state (although, al-Shabaab itself is made up principally of only a few clans, with others only weakly represented).

The growth in influence of Islamist ideologies has added to the complexity of the context. Most Somalis have traditionally been Sunni Muslims in the Sufi tradition (a mystical form of Islam that Islamist schools of thought view as a corruption of "pure Islam") but Islamist movements have been growing in popularity in Somalia since the 1960s. Their strong anti-Western stance has reinforced traditional Somali opposition to outside interference. At the same time the strict form of Islam they propagate brings them into conflict with aspects of Somali society – bans in al-Shabaab areas on viewing football matches and the chewing of the mild stimulant khat were particularly unpopular. While there is support for a role for Islam in public life, there is no agreement about the nature and extent of that role.

Nervous neighbours

The intractability of Somalia's problems is complicated by the interests of its neighbours who wish to avoid a spillover of problems into their territories. Ethiopia, however, is wary of a strong Somali state, particularly one with Islamist leanings. This prompted its intervention in 2006 and again in 2011. Its attitude is unlikely to change, even with the recent death of Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. The perception of Ethiopia as a Christian state, and a close ally of the US in its fight against terrorism, feeds an Islamist discourse against the "infidel" invader. Relations with Ethiopia are further complicated by the role Eritrea has played in supporting Somali opposition to Ethiopia in the framework of its on-going dispute with its southern neighbour. Kenya, long a home

Somalia and its neighbours

ERITREA • YEMEN
Gulf of Aden
DJIBOUTI
Somaliland • Puntland
Contested Area
ETHIOPIA
SOMALIA
★ Mogadishu
KENYA
The Indian Ocean

to Somali refugees fleeing violence and destitution, had studiously tried to avoid getting pulled into the Somali conflict. However, pressured by Western donors and prompted by increasing al-Shabaab activity on Kenyan soil (including targeted attacks in Nairobi), as well as a series of high profile kidnappings of tourists by Somali groups, Kenyan troops entered Somalia in autumn 2011 and are supporting the push against al-Shabaab from the south.

African regional organisations, notably the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), have long tried to play a role in brokering peace in Somalia. AMISOM, the AU mission in Somalia mandated by the UN to support the TFG and fight al-Shabaab, although theoretically a demonstration of African political leadership and a will to see "Africans solving African problems", is in reality largely funded by Western donors, and political coordination of international involvement is actually led by the UN and not the AU.

The Somali government is heavily reliant on AMISOM forces fighting in coordination with Ethiopian forces and their local proxies. Such a strong role for foreign forces, particularly those from "enemy" Ethiopia, compounded by the absence of a democratic mandate, makes it difficult for the Somali government to claim local legitimacy and raises concerns of the undue influence of outside agendas. The involvement of additional international actors beyond the regional level only adds to the complexity.

International agendas

Pressure to map out the end of the transition came from members of the International Contact Group on Somalia (ICG), a co-ordinating forum of more than 40 countries and international organisations supportive of the Somali peace process. While clearly concerned by the long-running governance vacuum and humanitarian crisis (with famine officially declared in July 2011), international engagement has also been influenced by other factors.

Security concerns have played their role. For the US, Somalia represents a frontline in its continuing fight against international terrorism. Territory controlled by al-Shabaab, which al-Qaeda officially recognised as an affiliate in February 2012, is considered a launching pad for al-Qaeda-inspired attacks across Eastern Africa. The threat that piracy poses to international shipping in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean is also viewed as a direct consequence of the instability in Somalia. These factors have increased international support for a security-led solution based on AMISOM troops winning back and controlling territory for the Somali government and the development of Somali security forces so that they can impose some degree of law and order. This strategy also requires a pro-Western government in Mogadishu, supportive of these policy priorities and of US counter-terrorist activities on Somali soil and international anti-piracy action in Somali waters.

Not all foreign governments share the same concerns. Muslim countries, particularly Arab and Gulf states, have been influential in Somalia, largely through support for Islamic charitable and educational institutions. Somalia has presented an opportunity for newly emerging Muslim donors such as Turkey and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to profile themselves as major humanitarian and mediation actors. In addition to motives of charity and prestige, there exists a desire to counteract Western influence and promote Islamic values. The same sentiment motivates private donations to al-Shabaab who also finance themselves through the charcoal trade to Gulf states. While Muslim governments have not succeeded in offering a significant alternative vision to the political process backed by Western donors, these underlying tensions in the international community mirror and reinforce some of the divisions within Somalia.

A flawed solution

The latest attempts at a political fix are unlikely to represent the durable political settlement that Somalis are long overdue. Current efforts over the last year may result in the successful conclusion of a political transition but superficial progress has been achieved at the expense of substantive resolution of some of the key sources of instability and against the backdrop of an ongoing active conflict.

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, the transition process itself was neither democratic nor inclusive enough for the resulting government to enjoy the necessary legitimacy. Insecurity made popular elections impossible and so the members of parliament were nominated by a constituent assembly that itself was selected along clan lines according to the same formula used to select the previous TFG. The ongoing conflict with al-Shabaab meant that an important constituency was excluded from the process. Even more significantly, the numerous Somali constituencies that neither supported the TFG nor al-Shabaab, but attempted to survive in the middle ground, found themselves portrayed by the UN as "spoilers" for failing to endorse the selection process for the constituent assembly. Effectively excluded from the process and critical of what they perceive as an undemocratic and imposed solution, such Somali communities remain alienated and increasingly likely to be hostile to foreign efforts to impose central governance on Somalia.

Although the provisional constitution confirms Somalia is a federal state, and international governments talk of a dual-track approach of supporting both local administrations and central government, the political process until now has largely been top-down, focusing on creation of a central government first and worrying about the federal units later. This reflects both a Western-backed decision to pursue a military-led strategy that requires one primary interlocutor and the reality that large parts of the country are under al-Shabaab control and not part of any settlement, federal or otherwise. This preservation of central government as a major source of power and patronage only serves to perpetuate the winner-takes-all mentality that has fuelled clan competition.

What next?

While some might argue that international interference is itself an impediment to a sustainable settlement in Somalia, the interests of international actors make their involvement unavoidable. What Somalia needs is for international actors to find the elusive balance between constructive support and counter-productive interference that has so far evaded them.

Constructive support means maintaining pressure on the Somali government to build its legitimacy amongst ordinary Somalis or to lay the ground for the election of a truly legitimate successor administration. Legitimacy will come from building consensus around the nature of the state (the balance of power between the central government and federated units, the role of Islam, the means of selecting political authorities) in an inclusive and consultative manner. That the recent process was heavily influenced and managed by international actors undermined the possibility for that to happen this time around. As Afghanistan has shown, an approach based heavily on foreign military intervention to defeat a home-grown Islamist movement is unlikely to lead to a sustainable settlement. The question remains: what happens when the AMISOM troops go home? The Somali authorities need to explore and develop channels for dialogue with al-Shabaab, if and when that becomes a possibility, in order that a truly inclusive settlement can be found.

Switzerland and Somalia

Switzerland has long actively promoted peace and stabilisation in Somalia, supporting negotiations and providing constitutional expertise. Currently it is a member of the ICG's core group, providing support and guidance to the UN Political Office for Somalia. Since 2009 it has focused on supporting the drafting and consultation work on the constitution. Switzerland funds demining and electoral support activities in Somaliland and supports confidence-building and dialogue activities with other regional entities.

Switzerland also supports victims of conflicts and natural disasters in Somalia. The annual humanitarian budget for Somalia is approximately CHF 7 to 10 million although in 2011 a total of CHF 37 million was allocated for humanitarian assistance in the Horn of Africa. Roughly half of this was allocated to aid in Somalia while the rest went to other countries in the region, many of which are hosting refugees from Somalia. Switzerland is currently designing a whole-of-government regional strategy for the Horn of Africa, which will add a strong development aid component and which will be effective from 2013.

Avoiding counter-productive interference means giving Somalis the space to reach a solution that works for them. Possible inspiration for such a solution might be found in the positive examples of things that are working in Somalia. These include a flourishing mobile phone sector, a robust livestock trade, a functioning currency, and an efficient money transfer system that enables a very significant flow of re-mittances from the diaspora. Some local administrations have achieved moderate success at providing services and main-taining law and order – Somaliland being the biggest example but there are others.

Rather than a top-down approach to peacebuilding that has been favoured un-til now, a successful solution may come through the creation of an enabling space for the replication and expansion of these local successes. It was such a bottom-up dynamic that led to the government of the UIC which presided over the most peaceful period of Somalia's last two decades. Inter-national actors must recognise that their emphasis on a top-down, security-driven approach has been counter-productive and step back to let a truly legitimate local so-lution be found.

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