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Citizen Centered Approach to Preventing Violent Extremism: A Case of Somaliland

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Abstract. The Horn of Africa region has been tackling prolonged ideology-based extremism for over two decades. Several factors are believed to have fueled the rise of extremism in the region, including but not limited to poverty, marginalization, lack of youth engagement, limited integration among regional states, limited access to formal education, and religious misconceptions. Somaliland, which is internationally part of Somalia but declared independence and regulated itself for the last 30 years; has succeeded in controlling both extremism and other forms of violence such as the pirates with a unique approach to citizens' engagement as a community policing. Violent extremism massively penetrated the region with its strong base in Somalia. Despite progress in countering and preventing violent extremism with regional effort and international community support, there is no single strategy and best practices applied by all regional governments to prevent violent extremism. Therefore, this paper will assess the new paradigm of prevention with the Somaliland approach of citizen engagement and how these elements contributed prevention of extremism spread across the border to neighboring countries and beyond. This study will employ a Trust-Based, Qualitative Methodology developed by ICEPCVE. The reason is to assess the impacts of National and Regional Efforts in Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism explicitly and accurately. This paper will unpack Somaliland's approaches to tackling these global and regional challenges of violent extremism and the secret of stability for more than 30 years, what other countries can learn about it, and how with thoughtful recommendations.

Keywords. Extremism, Violence, citizen centered approach, community policing strategy, and community empowerment

1. Introduction

The Horn of Africa has been a home for perennial conflicts over the past two decades. Among several but sources of conflicts comprise political, ethnic-based, or ideology centered. In addition, the mix of poor governance, mutual destabilization, and external interventions are the combustible ingredients of the region always hovering on the edges of insecurity.¹ Somaliland – a self-declared but unrecognized by international community shares some challenges but has self-made solutions to cope with conflicts.

On 18th May 1991 at this second national meeting, the Somali National Movement (SNM) Central Committee, with the support of a meeting of elders representing the major clans

in the Northern Regions, declared the restoration of the Republic of Somaliland, covering the same area as that of the former British Protectorate. The Burao conference also established a government for the Republic; an administration that inherited a war-ravaged country in which tens of thousands of people had been killed, many thousands injured, and the main cities, Hargeisa and Burao, almost entirely destroyed.²

Somaliland endured two significant internal conflicts from 1994–1996 when different Isaq sub-clans fought over access to critical resources in Hargeisa and Burao, as well as over political representation within the new government.³ However, final resolution and agreements have been reached through discussions and consensus led by prominent traditional leaders and government representatives. Among the most serious challenges Somaliland faced were the attempts radical groups established military bases in the outskirts of big cities - Hargeisa, Burao, and Borama between 1991 and 1997. However, all the renaissances ended up in failures.

Today, Somaliland boasts a degree of stability that exceeds that of the other Somali territories and has taken many credible steps towards the establishment of a genuinely pluralistic democracy. The system of governance has evolved from a beel (clan-based) system, to one of multi-party democracy, in which clan affiliation continues to play a significant part.⁴ That arrangement later morphed into rebuilding formal security institutions and creation of the basic infrastructure of hybrid security governance system as part of a state and nation-building initiative.⁵ Although al-Shabaab's coordinated 2008 bombings in Hargeisa may be a subject of lingering anxiety among some Somalilanders, increased local awareness, improved criminal justice measures, and "intense scrutiny by a proud and nationalistic populace" are considered by others an effective bulwark against terrorist infiltration.⁶

This research paper titled citizen centered approach to preventing violent extremism: case of Somaliland aims to elaborate the unique mechanisms that facilitated Somaliland's sustainable peace and security rather than that of other neighboring countries. The paper explains how Somaliland's preventing and countering extremism measures aided the security of neighboring countries.

2.0 Somaliland State-building Process

Indeed, decolonization resulted in the emergence of a sovereign Somaliland on 26 June 1960. After just four days of independence, Somaliland dissolved its statehood and voluntarily joined with Italian Somaliland to form the Somali Republic on 1 July 1960.⁷ During the union, Somaliland inhabitants faced ethnic marginalization from the regime led by Barre where insurgents from Isaq clans formed Somali National Movement (SNM) who had armed fighting against Barre's regime where he was finally ousted from the administration. After the collapse of Barre's regime in 1991, the Somali nation was in tatters. The SNM had taken control of most of the Northern Regions of the erstwhile Somali Democratic Republic. Their area of dominance extended from Erigavo through Burao, Hargeisa and Borama to Lawya'addo, which shares a border with Djibouti, and it was this territory in which the Isaq-dominated SNM focused on agreeing ceasefire pacts with the non-Isaq clans who had supported Siyad Barre.⁸ Based on the pact and consensus based agreements was the result of peaceful Somaliland along with the implementation of liberal democracy where civil rights were acceptable to everyone, and no one was pressured because of his/her political view. Somaliland fulfilled free and fair elections where elections and clan rotation of power was exercised which realized inclusive government system.^a

2.1 Role of Traditional Leaders in State-building

At the onset of Somalia's state collapse in the early 1990s, Somaliland's traditional leaders and SNM senior officials began to lay the foundation for the creation of a new and independent state. Beginning with local shirs (Somali word meaning conferences) across the country, elders invoked clan affiliations to establish a rapport, end violence and mobilize support for an independent northern territory, a move critical in framing the Barre regime as a common enemy of all northern Somalis.⁹ Elders also played a significant role in restoring peace, as mediators and through the traditional justice system of *xeer* (Somali word meaning law). The inability of the SNM central command to establish a viable regional administration in the immediate aftermath of their military victory resulted in a power vacuum, which in turn facilitated the emergence of the authority of clan elders throughout the region.¹⁰

This state-building process occurred through cooperation between traditional authorities such as elders and sheikhs, politicians, former guerillas, intellectuals and ordinary people who decided to put their guns aside and solve problems peacefully, and with only marginal external support from international organisations.

This state-building process occurred through cooperation between traditional authorities such as elders and sheikhs, politicians, former guerillas, intellectuals, and ordinary people who decided to put their guns aside and solve problems peacefully, and with only marginal external support from international organizations.¹¹ Even during periods of fighting, communication between the clans continued. It was often facilitated by women, who were able to liaise between their paternal clan on one side, and that into which they married on the other. In many instances, this allowed meaningful communication even when other channels were closed.¹² Some analysts have accredited Somaliland's relative stability to its bottom-up peacebuilding approach.¹³ This shed on light that in the peace-building process no one was left behind.

Traditional leaders have been the spine of peace of all times. Till now, because of their trust by people, they solve conflicts more than government does.^b Somali people were known to government around 60 years, however, before government, traditional leaders were administering conflicts. Peer group discussant said "Courts work out less than 20% in Somaliland conflicts while more than 80% are solved by traditional leaders. This is because, people have more confidence for elders than judiciary system". Growth of statehood also offered an opportunity to traditional leaders to receive a monthly stipend so that they can maintain their duties as bridge between the government and the citizens. In this case, traditional leaders are strong pillar of peace in Somaliland.

3.0 Background of radicalization in Somaliland

20th century was the first-time radical ideas were observed in Somaliland. The first wave was led by Mohamed Abdulla Hassan who viewed his non-followers as disbelievers in Islam. The struggle concluded when he passed away in early 20th century.^c Somalis in East Africa had culture entrenched to Islam before Somali government was formed. However, the new government system connected them to different cultures where Somali culture was corrupted due to identity crisis created by some of the Arab countries having said that Somalis are Arabs. Interviewee said, "The mixture of Arabism and Islamism led many people to frustration where Arab culture and their ideological Islamic doctrine have been seen as the sole right philosophy by some of Somali people which triggered to shift from their original Islamic doctrine".

In 1970th Jihadist movements started; nevertheless, it was hard to grow due to a strong communist military government. When central Somalia government collapsed in 1991, extremists had their first platform to exercise their ideology towards seizing the power through claims of Islamic revolutions. The mindset of extremists was to view all people in the government and citizens who didn't follow them as sceptics in Islam. Secondly, because of the state collapse, needs created and people were obliged to look for livelihoods as there was no state to protect them or give them employment opportunities. Apparently, overseas stakeholders with the support of local actors benefited from the opportunity and engaged the youth. The study Interviewee said, "Extremism transferred from Afghanistan through video clips about orientation carried by trained Somali extremists in 1990".^d However, different perspectives claim that extremism was originally from Saudi Arabia as the Salafi Wahabi school of doctrine was initially from the Saudi Arabia.

3.1 Hurdles to expansion of violent extremism in Somaliland

Somaliland communities have traditional system of governance, in which customary law and the clan system from which it derived provided the model for conflict resolution and a hybrid political order in general. This system of governance has gained prominence and space after the collapse of the formal institutions of then Somali Republic.¹⁴

Radical movements which started in early 1990s were undermined by several factors. Firstly, people were armed on clan-bases as there were tensions among sub-clans, they couldn't accept external forces to establish military base in their dwellings. The leader of the group himself was considered as someone from another clan who want to control-over them rather than a religious leader. Secondly, the relationship of the group with Somaliland people was too loose since they hanged off during battle with Barre and called it Haram (illegal). Therefore, people kept this information and later disallowed to give them space. Thirdly, Somaliland citizens chose a flag with Tawhid (monotheism of Islam) on it, therefore, could no other way be possible to accept another flag. Finally, they were unable to multiply people believing in their ideology because they were bravely debated and defeated by religious leaders already present in Somaliland.^e

In 2006, a newly linked Al-Qaeda Somali extremist group called Al-Shabab began militancy operations in Southern Somalia. When al-Shabaab began to coalesce as an organization, billions of dollars have been spent by the United States and the international community to fight the group.¹⁵ The expenditure of vast sums of money and the eventual deployment of 22,000 soldiers by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), however, have failed to defeat the organization.¹⁶

Notably, al-Shabaab has failed to establish an enduring foothold in the unrecognized Republic of Somaliland. There, the government of Somaliland exerts consistent control over most of the territory that it claims. Al-Shabaab has not launched a large-scale attack in Somaliland since 2008 when it struck the presidential palace, the Ethiopian consulate, and UNDP offices in Hargeisa, Somaliland's capital.¹⁷ For officials in Somaliland, the attacks were a wake-up call. It was after these attacks that the government began to focus more of its limited resources on local governance, counterterrorism, and community-driven intelligence initiatives.¹⁸

The reasons for al-Shabaab's failure, at least so far, to establish a foothold in Somaliland are due in large part to the Somaliland government's ability to disrupt al-Shabaab's attempts to insert itself and its operatives into communities where it could then establish its shadow government. This ability is predicated on the Somaliland government's fostering of a

virtuous circle. This virtuous circle begins with effective, locally derived governance that supports broad community buy-in. This then provides the critical human intelligence (HUMINT) that allows the government to combat militancy. This capacity to combat militancy contributes to the security and governance that yields the broad support that allows the circle to perpetuate itself.¹⁹ To that end, the case of Somaliland demonstrates what can be done when a government works closely with its citizens to combat militancy.²⁰

3.2 Role of Hybrid governance in combating violent extremism

This hybrid government is a key part of Somaliland's battle against al-Shabaab. It helps Somaliland diffuse and mitigate conflict while keeping the government close to the people it governs.²¹ Its hybrid institutional framework, allocating diffuse responsibilities among traditional authorities and governmental institutions, has succeeded in earning widespread support and legitimacy among local populations and the diaspora.²² The success of peace building and 'state-building' in Somaliland was to a large extent due to the involvement of traditional actors and customary institutions that are rooted in the traditional clan-based Somali society.²³ Somaliland has adopted a kind of hybrid government that is very much of its own making. Clan elders continue to play formal and informal roles in governance and are represented in Somaliland's upper house of parliament, the Guurti. It is this hybrid form of government and the fact that Somaliland has had to contend with little outside interference that have most contributed to its relative stability.²⁴

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Somaliland inhabitants accepted the challenges faced during union with Somalia Republic as they met an alienation from the power as well as atrocities during Barre's regime. The impact led insurgents from Somaliland to fight against the regime along with other actors in other parts of Somalia Republic which resulted in its demise. The collapse of the central government provided Somaliland communities a space to establish a state from grassroot level. SNM with the support of traditional leaders organized different peacebuilding conferences before the state formation was started. After discussions, Somaliland major clan leaders decided to reclaim Somaliland as an independent country.

State-building process took several years as there were internal conflicts among clans in Somaliland. However, hybrid government system connecting clans-based with modern governance system of democracy developed. The new approach became successful and unique both in sustaining peace and development. However, the fragility of the system led sometimes to offer loopholes to extremist groups. Somaliland hosted several attempts by extremist groups to settle on and make military bases. Hence, the vigilance of citizens from what is happening around neighboring, past experiences from the impact of wars, interdependence of its people, decentralized governance, and lack of external interventions, made unacceptable for terrorists to stay on.

Recommendations

- Somaliland's hybrid governance system of connecting clan-based with democratic governance needs reform and modernization. Because, in the long-run sustainability could create compliance-based contradictions.

- Somaliland government should fill out dodges that can attract extremist groups such as youth unemployment which is the major security threat in the meantime.
 - Somaliland should play pivotal role on the regional geo-politics and link up to more regional and international friends to support its vision of independence. Independent Somaliland can build up strong forces to combat violent extremists in the region.
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Notes

- [a] Key Informant Interviewee, independent researcher on radicalization and violent extremism movements expert, October 2022
- [b] Participant of Peer Group Discussion, Religious scholar addressing the importance of traditional leaders on state-building
- [c] Interviewee from University of Burao, history and political analyst elaborated the history of radicalization in Somaliland
- [d] Interviewee - lecturer and religious affairs researcher at University of Burao stated the channels through which radical ideas were submitted to.
- [e] Combined views of peer group discussions, key informant interviews of religious scholars, traditional leaders, and independent researchers on radicalization.
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Biography of the Author

Mohamoud Saed Adad is the Director of Planning and Development at Civil Service Institute (CSI) Somaliland. He is a researcher and lecturer at University of Burao. The author has hands on experience in peace and security particularly in preventing/countering of extremism in

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