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Somalia at the Tipping Point?

KEN MENKHAUS

On the surface, the 2011 Somali famine seemed a painful case of *déjà vu*. The distressing media images of emaciated children, squalid refugee camps, predatory armed militias, and lawless streets were near carbon copies of coverage of the warlordism and famine that gripped Somalia 20 years ago—a crisis that prompted the unprecedented and ultimately disastrous US-led humanitarian intervention in late 1992.

The fact that Somalia today is still mired in chronic humanitarian emergencies and armed conflict fully two decades after the state first collapsed in 1991 has reinforced a widespread perception that the country is caught in a conflict trap that is impervious to local or externally imposed solutions. From this perspective, the most significant feature of the crisis is what some would call “catastrophic equilibrium”—a pathologically destructive, self-reinforcing quagmire.

And yet, much has changed in Somalia over the course of its 20-year crisis, so much so that the country is largely unrecognizable to those who knew it in the early 1990s. Some of the changes—such as the ascendance of Islamism, the rise of a robust transnational business class, and the diasporization of Somali society—have been gradual and subtle, but have transformed Somalia. Other changes have occurred suddenly and unexpectedly, in the form of seismic, often violent upheavals in local and national political orders. The rise and fall of the Islamic Courts Union in 2006, the Ethiopian military occupation of the capital Mogadishu in 2007–08, and the dramatic ascent of the jihadist group Al Shabab in 2007 are all examples.

The question of continuity versus change is very much in play in Somalia today, as the nation faces what could be a tipping point in 2012. The most visible catalyst is the anticipated end of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in August 2012. There is considerable uncertainty over what will succeed the TFG, and even more confusion over the process by which a successor government will be formed. The security situation is also in flux, with Al Shabab facing multiple offensives by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), Kenyan and Ethiopian militaries, and local Somali militias—even as Al Shabab demonstrates a continued ability to inflict heavy damage through suicide bombings. Southern Somalia, meanwhile, remains perilously vulnerable to another disastrous humanitarian crisis if forecasts of poor rains are accurate.

The question facing international observers and Somalis alike is whether any of these developments will actually serve as a tipping point—for better or for worse—in the tortured country’s political landscape.

TRANSITION’S END

The TFG was formed in late 2004 for what was originally intended to be a five-year transitional period. During that time the government was supposed to complete essential transitional tasks, culminating in a popular referendum on a new constitution and the election of a permanent government. The years since have been anything but smooth. The TFG immediately split in 2005, has remained largely dysfunctional, and has had to operate in a dangerous state of siege in the capital. It has undergone turbulent changes of personnel, including two presidents, five prime ministers, and numerous changes in the cabinet.

KEN MENKHAUS is a professor of political science at Davidson College.

Southern Somalia during this period has endured multiple foreign military interventions and an extraordinarily violent jihadist insurgency, a combination that has at times turned Mogadishu into a war zone. War and famine have displaced 1.3 million Somalis (about a quarter of the population of south-central Somalia) and driven over 980,000 refugees into neighboring Kenya, Yemen, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. Not surprisingly, the transitional process has fallen far behind schedule, and the TFG's area of control does not even encompass all of the capital city. The rest of the country remains in the hands of Al Shabab, self-declared regional mini-states, clan militias, and the military forces of neighboring Ethiopia and Kenya.

But the transition is not merely a victim of inauspicious circumstances. It has also been waylaid by design. The deeply corrupt TFG leadership has demonstrated no commitment to advancing the transition; it has instead devoted most of its energies to diverting government revenues and foreign aid, waging internal power struggles, and traveling abroad. At times it has actively obstructed efforts to improve governance and security in its areas of control. Some TFG officials were even culpable in diversion of food aid intended for famine victims who managed to make their way to Mogadishu in 2011. TFG leaders have found it easier and more profitable to preside over a transition in perpetuity than to take on the arduous task of rebuilding a functional state.

Despite the efforts of many dedicated civil servants in the fledgling TFG, hundreds of millions of dollars of foreign aid for state building, security sector revival, and humanitarian relief have been wasted. This dismal record has led exasperated foreign donors to shift their position. After years of failed attempts to coax the TFG into governing and advancing the transition, the international community in 2011 came to a conclusion that most Somalis had reached years earlier—that the TFG as currently structured is not a viable, legitimate vehicle for governing the country and completing the transition. The realization resulted in an unusual policy move: a declaration in August 2011 that in one year the transition would end.

This places Somalia's TFG in a unique category—a failure among failed states. Most post-

conflict transitional governments face daunting challenges, are very weak, and invariably fall behind schedule in advancing their transitions. Most transitional governments are granted extensions by the United Nations as a result. The final push to end political transitions is typically ragged, rushed, and flawed—a case of stumbling across the finish line—but nonetheless culminates in a new constitution and the election of a permanent government. Not so for Somalia. Its end-of-transition moment is a capstone of seven years of inertia. The current transition is ending only because the international community is pulling the plug on a process that never gave much reason for hope in the first place.

IN A RUSH

The process by which the TFG will end has been brokered through a series of agreements reached by various local and external actors over the course of 2011 and 2012. The most recent of these accords, the “Garowe Principles,” provides details on an ambitious UN-led roadmap for 2012. The scope of work is daunting. The UN Political Office for Somalia hopes to guide Somali “stakeholders” to finalize a provisional constitution (by April 2012), create a 1,000-person national constituent assembly (by May 2012), hold a vote by the constituent assembly on the provisional constitution (by May 22), select a new 225-person parliament (by June 15), and have the new parliament elect a speaker (by July 20) and a president (August 20). If and when these tasks are accomplished, the new president will form a new post-TFG government, which will then govern for four years until a full national election can take place.

Challenges with this end-of-transition initiative abound, and have produced a wave of anxiety among Somalis. The very tight deadlines are the most obvious problem. The current timetable is trying to accomplish in a matter of months what the TFG could not or would not do in seven years. This runs a risk of sacrificing the legitimacy of the post-TFG government at the altar of what many view as an arbitrary and unrealistic timetable.

Another concern for Somalis is that critical details about the process by which the constituent assembly and new parliament will be formed are vague or unstated. For instance, the Garowe

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Principles state that “recognized traditional elders assisted by qualified civil society members” will nominate members of the parliament based on proportional representation by clan (the so-called “4.5 formula”). But the question of who constitutes a genuine clan elder is a matter of contention in Somalia, as is the designation of “qualified civil society member.”

Likewise, the nominations for the parliament are to be evaluated by a 15-member Independent Interim Electoral Commission “consisting of representatives of Somali stakeholders”—with no discussion of how stakeholders are defined, or who decides the composition of this commission. Details on the nomination process for the 1,000 members of the proposed constituent assembly are also frustratingly unclear.

FEAR AND SKEPTICISM

All of this has raised fears among Somalis that the lack of clarity in the end-of-transition process is intentionally designed to facilitate manipulation of the outcome, either by the current TFG leadership or by external actors. More than a few Somalis have also argued that the agreements reached to produce this end-of-transition roadmap are themselves violations of the transitional charter, and hence extra-constitutional.

An equally important and unresolved issue is the nature of the post-transitional government. Some Somali political aspirants appear to be viewing the post-TFG administration as a permanent government. Yet some foreign donors have referred to it as a “caretaker government,” a depiction that the Garowe Principles themselves reinforce by describing the mandate of the new government to include “preparation of the country for a referendum and general elections.” If so, the post-transition government would be just another transitional administration—in which case the entire process would amount to pouring old wine in a new bottle. Why then, critics have asked, is the international community pushing so hard to end the TFG if the replacement government is just another interim administration?

The answer may be that the UN Political Office for Somalia and key donor states are hoping that the provisional constitution helps jump-start the transition, and that the selection of a new parliament and government will provide an opportunity to purge the Somali political scene of some of the most obstructionist personalities in the TFG. Inclusion of subnational states and polities as

stakeholders in deliberations over the end of the transition is also seen as a positive development, by rewarding actual governance performance at the local level.

Many Somalis, however, are deeply skeptical about the inclusion of subnational states as stakeholders, seeing it as a move that could balkanize Somalia into “clanustans.” They are equally skeptical about the likely outcome of the end of the transition. Most observers of Somali politics anticipate that the current TFG leadership of President Sheik Sharif Sheik Ahmed and Speaker Sharif Hassan Sheik Aden will either manipulate the process to guarantee that they emerge as leaders again, or will engineer crises designed to force the international community to reluctantly grant them another extension. Both scenarios are plausible—and not mutually exclusive.

The international community—which, to its credit, has succeeded in building a much more unified position toward Somalia than has been the case in years past—is in a poor bargaining position in either event. Western donor states, the UN, the African Union, and other international actors taking on new and prominent roles in Somalia, such as Turkey, cannot afford to “decertify” the TFG without some kind of replacement administration, or the AMISOM peace operation would have no *raison d'être*. And a withdrawal of AMISOM forces at this point is out of the question for Western and neighboring African states, as it potentially would allow Al Shabab to capture all of Mogadishu.

What all this means is that the international community currently needs the TFG more than the TFG needs the international community. This equation has not been lost on TFG leaders, and explains in part why they have been able to get away with such brazen malfeasance.

There is a chance that the end of the TFG will produce a new and more committed set of leaders in the government and parliament; if so, the end of the transition in 2012 really could constitute a positive tipping point for the country. This alone justifies efforts to get the end of the transition right. However, a more likely outcome is a post-TFG government that looks and acts very much like its predecessor, condemning Somalia to four more years of political paralysis and *de facto* state collapse.

In a worst-case scenario, a highly contentious and controversial end to the transition could prompt dissatisfied armed groups and subnational

polities that are currently affiliated with the TFG to defect or even to attack the new government. The prospect of fighting within the current anti-Shabab alliance would be a nightmare for AMISOM and Western donor states, and it could trigger a proliferation of new autonomous regional states, contributing to further political fragmentation in Somalia. In sum, the end of the transition in Somalia is risky: While it holds the possibility of a political breakthrough, it could also tip the country into a new and even more serious crisis.

AL SHABAB UNDER PRESSURE

Al Shabab is faring no better than the TFG, and is in a weak position to exploit the end-of-transition uncertainties. Militarily, it has been pushed back on multiple fronts by offensives by AMISOM forces, Ethiopian and Kenyan troops, and Somali clan militias allied with the foreign forces. In the summer of 2011, Al Shabab withdrew from most of Mogadishu after sustaining heavy losses in direct combat with the better-armed African Union peacekeeping forces.

In October 2011 Kenyan forces launched an offensive into Somalia's Juba regions to push Al Shabab out of its border areas. Although the offensive subsequently stalled, Kenyan forces remain in the Somali border areas and could advance on the lucrative seaport of Kismayo, Al Shabab's main cash cow. In late 2011 and early 2012, Ethiopian forces advanced into southern Somalia as well, helping its local proxies recapture the important towns of Beledweyne and Baidoa. Al Shabab still controls much of southern Somalia, but these losses have put the group on the defensive and exposed its vulnerabilities.

In response, Al Shabab has successfully mounted repeated and sometimes very serious terrorist attacks against the TFG and AMISOM, easily infiltrating parts of the capital that are supposed to be under TFG control. Political assassinations of TFG members and supporters have occurred daily, and a string of suicide bombings against TFG facilities has inflicted heavy losses. Many of the attacks have been inside jobs by Al Shabab operatives who infiltrated TFG security forces.

But the recourse to asymmetric urban guerrilla war has come at a heavy cost to Al Shabab. The group's suicide bombings have often targeted civilian gatherings, including crowded mosques, a medical graduation ceremony, a line of students waiting to get test results for scholarships to Turkey, and a ceremony at the National Theater.

This has produced a significant backlash against the organization among most Somalis, including those who initially supported it in 2007–08 when it was seen as a liberation force against an Ethiopian military occupation of the capital.

Al Shabab's legitimacy and support among Somalis have been in steady decline for other reasons as well. The group's draconian interpretation of Islamic laws, forced conscription, attacks on Sufi shrines and customs, and affiliation with Al Qaeda have repelled most Somalis. But the most self-defeating policy of all was Al Shabab's gross mishandling of the 2011 famine. The famine occurred in the southern Somali countryside controlled by Al Shabab. Al Shabab's response included banning most international relief agencies from operating in the famine zones, repeated denial of the existence of a famine, and preventing famine victims from relocating to areas where food aid was available.

Because relief agencies were unable to reach much of southern Somalia, reliable data on the number of famine-related fatalities are impossible to secure. But the horrific condition of survivors who managed to reach Mogadishu or the Kenyan and Ethiopian border spoke volumes about conditions in Shabab-controlled areas, and made clear that the group had presided over the worst famine the world had witnessed in 20 years. Al Shabab may never recover its credibility among Somalis after its mishandling of the famine.

MILITANT DISARRAY

The jihadist group has also suffered serious internal divisions. Its top leadership is in disarray following the death of an Al Qaeda operative, Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, in a shootout at a TFG checkpoint in June 2011. Rumors quickly spread that his death was a setup by a rival Somali Al Shabab leader, Ahmed Abdi Godane. In the aftermath of Fazul's death, many of the foreign fighters in Al Shabab reportedly left for Yemen, having lost confidence in the organization.

Open rifts have emerged in the group's leadership over a series of issues, including affiliation with Al Qaeda, targeting of civilians, and clannism. In March 2012, a senior figure in Al Shabab, Hassan Dahir Aweys, publicly criticized the organization for wanton violence against civilians and its declaration of a merger with Al Qaeda. That same month, an American jihadist who had come to play a leading role in Al Shabab under the name Abu Mansoor al-Amriki issued a video pleading

that his life was in danger because of his disagreements with the group's policies. Other members subsequently arrested him.

One of the most telling signs of Al Shabab's weakness has been its inability to mobilize Somali support in response to the recent military incursions by neighboring Ethiopia and Kenya. Although most Somalis are profoundly unhappy with these foreign interventions, they are unwilling to rally behind Al Shabab. The movement appears to have lost its ability to conflate its radical jihadism with Somali nationalism the way it did so successfully in 2007.

Even so, Al Shabab remains the strongest Somali armed group in the country, and it continues to hold far more territory than any other group in southern Somalia. It is no longer able to recruit from the Somali diaspora in significant numbers, but it continues to find individuals willing to serve as suicide bombers to devastating effect. Its fundraising abroad is now weak, but it generates an estimated \$70 million to \$100 million per year mainly from taxes on imports and exports of sugar, charcoal, and other goods through the port of Kismayo.

It also retains a small but dedicated network of supporters in parts of Kenya and in the Somali diaspora in the West. Al Shabab is considered one of the most dangerous of the Al Qaeda affiliates. Security analysts fear it could launch a major terrorist attack in Kenya at any time, and the group is high on the list of terrorist threats anticipated for the 2012 summer Olympics in London.

It is possible that continued military losses and political infighting could produce major defections from Al Shabab, leading to a sudden collapse of the insurgency. It is more likely that the group will weaken and even splinter into rival Islamist militias, but will nonetheless endure as a violent spoiler maintaining control over portions of southern Somalia for years to come.

In either case, observers must not confuse the demise of Al Shabab as a jihadist insurgency with the end of all the sentiments it has embodied. Many Somalis who find Al Shabab abhorrent as an organization nonetheless subscribe to some of the views it articulates. Al Shabab has given voice to deeply-held Somali grievances—over the continued armed occupation of the country

by AMISOM and neighboring nations, over the humiliation of 20 years of state collapse and powerlessness, over disdain for corrupt UN- and Western-backed Somali governments that fail to deliver, and over American counterterrorism policies that are viewed as part of a conspiracy against Somalis. Al Shabab has also been the most effective Somali movement to date in tapping a widely held belief that Islam and sharia are the only answer to the country's long national nightmare. This narrative will endure in important parts of Somali society long after Al Shabab is reduced to irrelevance.

LIVELIHOODS ON THE LINE

The tipping point that may matter most in Somalia is the one that has the most immediate and direct impact on Somali households—the economy. The 2011 famine exposed growing strains on rural livelihoods across much of the country. Somalia's economy is increasingly bifurcated, with some households subsisting or even thriving on remittances sent from abroad, while the rest of the population struggles to eke out a living on local services and production in an exceptionally poor nation.

The rise of the remittance economy has been one of the truly transformational developments in Somalia over the past 20 years. The estimated 1.5 million members of the Somali diaspora (about 15 to 20 percent of the total population) send back about \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion in remittances annually. This dwarfs any other source of hard currency earnings in the country, including piracy ransoms, which last year reached \$160 million. Somalia's economy, including the consumer demand that fuels a vibrant commercial and service sector, is almost entirely dependent on the continued flow of remittances from abroad.

But the remittances only flow to a relatively privileged section of the population, mainly concentrated in urban areas. In the countryside, where over half of the population still resides as pastoralists, agro-pastoralists, or small farmers, subsistence production has come under enormous pressures from a "perfect storm" of factors including displacement, insecurity, lack of basic extension services, land grabs, growing pressure on the land, market failures, and recurring, severe droughts.

The international community is pulling the plug on a transition process that never gave much reason for hope.

Levels of chronic malnutrition are exceptionally high in southern Somalia's rural areas even in years of good rains. Impressive coping mechanisms that have enabled households to survive increasingly difficult times were strained to the breaking point in the summer of 2011, when one of the worst droughts in decades tipped thousands of households in parts of the country into famine conditions.

Famine may loom on the horizon again, as forecasts suggest another poor rainy season for the eastern Horn of Africa in 2012. The formal declaration of famine is a distinction without a difference for many Somali rural households, which suffer from high and chronic levels of food insecurity even in "normal" times. A particularly severe drought in 2012 will, however, almost certainly trigger another major wave of displacement and distress migration.

For Kenya, which is already hosting 520,000 Somali refugees (including 460,000 in the Dadaab camp, making it the world's largest refugee camp and Kenya's third-largest city), the prospect of another wave of hundreds of thousands of refugees is simply unsustainable. It could become a source of serious political tensions and instability in the midst of a sensitive period of political decentralization and elections in Kenya.

Over the past 20 years, Somali refugees have demonstrated a strong disinclination to repatriate, preferring instead either to stay in Kenya or to embark on dangerous journeys to third countries in the West. Distress migration is also likely to accelerate an already very rapid process of "urban drift" into Somalia's cities, a trend that is producing growing slums of destitute pastoralists and farmers with few prospects for employment.

SOMALIA'S TRAJECTORY

While transitional politics and the war against Al Shabab are dominating headlines, the real

tipping point may be occurring in the country's southern rural areas, where a combination of intense pressures is making subsistence livelihoods less and less viable and producing massive, irreversible migrations with enormous long-term implications for Somalia and Kenya.

As for Somalia's short-term political prospects, a close look at both the transitional process and Al Shabab suggests that less change may be in the air than many hope or fear. Since 1991, Somalia has gone through several cycles of political consolidation and fragmentation, and at present the country is unquestionably in another phase of fragmentation, when almost all of the main political actors—the TFG, Al Shabab, and many of the subnational states—are weakening and could splinter.

Even the relatively stable northern polities—secessionist Somaliland and non-secessionist Puntland—are facing defections by self-declared, clan-based statelets in the disputed regions of Sool and Sanaag. Fortunately, Somaliland in particular has managed to maintain an impressive level of stability, economic recovery, and democracy, and serves as an invaluable reminder to the rest of Somalis that peace and governance are not beyond their reach.

The process of political fragmentation now occurring in southern and central Somalia is already producing a revival of clan militias, or what some observers depict as a return of warlordism. Mogadishu alone features as many as 17 or more clan-based militias controlling neighborhoods and acting autonomously from the TFG and Al Shabab.

This kind of armed political fragmentation is clearly an impediment to state revival, and creates an extraordinarily complex operating environment in which Somali businesspeople, civil society, and international aid agencies are forced to navigate. But it is an environment that Somalis have learned to manage until the next initiative to consolidate authority enters the scene. ■