

# Religion & Conflict: The case of Somali Religious Leaders

Mahdi Abdile  
mahdi.abdile@helsinki.fi

## Somalia

- A British and Italian colony
- Independent in 1960
- It is bordered Kenya, Djibouti, Yemen and Ethiopia
- Vast majority of Somalis are Muslims
- In 1991 inter-clan civil war erupted
  - Somalia has 5 big clans and about 200 smaller clans
- The ensuing famine and death made Somalia an international issue
  - Somaliland declared independent and Puntland is control by self-governing authority
  - UN sent thousands of troops
  - UN withdrew in 1995
  - Warlords emerged- the Alliance for the restoration of peace and counter-terrorism
  - The emergence of Islamic courts Union

- In 2006 Ethiopia invaded the country citing security concerns
- The ICU and its military wing Al-Shabaab opposes the present of Ethiopians
- Today, much of the country is control by clan based local authorities
  - The central government (TFG) and Ethiopia control some part Mogadishu and Baidoa
  - ICU and its allies control most of the country
  - Eritrea's involvement
  - 15 peace conference

## Historical role

- Pre-colonial Somalia
  - Traditionally, religious leaders shared power with traditional elders
  - rank among the most respected historical figures in the Somali society
  - only educated members of society
  - inter-clan dispute was settled by traditional elders and religious leaders.
- The societal role of religious leaders was diverse during the pre-colonial era.
  - their role included, mediation, dealing with inheritance or marital issues, curing the sick (healing) through Quranic recitals or most importantly praying for rain during drought periods, bringing people out of ignorance through education and to spread Islam (Dawah).
  - religious leaders were viewed as individuals that had special abilities and could not behave like the average person
  - final word in disputes
  - Those earning the title of religious leaders enjoyed societal goodwill

- **During the colonial era religious**
  - religious leaders were recruited as administrators because they were educated and literate which contradicted their traditional role
  - The introduction of secular education weakened their traditional role
- **The formation of Somali state**
  - Further weakened their role and marginalize their influence
  - Different activist groups emerged
- **The collapse of the Somali state**
  - liberated activists long suppressed by the state
  - number of Islamic organizations emerged
  - Lack of central government coupled with increasing conflict and humanitarian crises have amplified the need for religious leaders to play a central role

## ➤ The religious leader's Changing Role

- the religious leader's influence has waned over time due to the urbanization proceeding during the colonial era, and the introduction of secular education
- After 1991 religious leaders re-emerged
  - open businesses
  - Run charities and schools
  - Have more feasible presents
- Not impartial mediators
- Have taken up arms/involve in the conflict
- Weaken status and prestige

➤ **Factors Undermining the Religious Leaders Role in Conflict**

- The emergence of many religious leaders groups affiliated to different schools of thought
- participation in inter-group fighting
- The emergence of a professional class
- The spread of secular knowledge and the interdependence of modern world sustain far-reaching societal change
- religious leaders have become target of personal attacks, harassment and killings, and this has induced many religious leaders to lay low
- Society's perception of religious leaders
- The negative impact- the war on terror

➤ **Conflict Resolution and the Management Capacity of the religious leaders**

- **Islamic belief system is deeply rooted in the Somali society; religious leaders are seen as the bearers of the Islamic faith**
- **Religious leaders have ability to utilize their religious status, societal prestige, embedded trust, and the respect**
- **Their knowledge of Islam provides practical tools for conflict resolution**
- They are seen as advocating for the common good rather than individual interest

➤ **Steps of solving conflicts**

- Formation of mediating team
- Sourcing funds: Business community
- Establish contact with counterparts from the feuding clans
- Seeking consent from the two sides to give assurance that they will comply with whatever ruling reached by the mediating religious leaders
- Mediation commence: immediate cessation of hostilities

## Conclusion

- The environment in which Somali religious worked has changed
- contemporary religious leaders s role has increased due to their taking on additional tasks, and they face distinct obstacles in the course of performing their duties
- Internationally, religious leaders are often seen as connected to terrorism, tarnishing their image nationally and internationally
  - discrediting religious leaders ability to mediate, and weakens their prestige, power, and influence
- The religious leaders position in Somali society nevertheless remains strong. They are trusted, respected and still seen as important mediators, who have an Islamic duty to solve disputes.