

SOMALIA 2011: FRENZIED DANCING IN PLACE

By Michael A. Weinstein

What does 2011 hold in store for Somalia's politics?

That is the question that I will address here within the context provided by Somali intellectuals who witness their country's fragmentation and, like some, have compared Somalia to the English nursery-rhyme character Humpty-Dumpty..... Is Somalia salvageable? they ask.

Somalia does not exist presently as a political subject, a political actor in the world that pursues interests by deploying power, has an organization that creates an internal order and is a player at the international table. Post-independence Somalia was a political subject; it lost that status in 1991, after the fall of Siad Barre's dictatorship, when its factions were unable to agree on a power-sharing formula that would keep them within a unit, when Humpty-Dumpty took the plunge. Since then political Somalia has become an imaginary, an idea of reclaiming what once was and rectifying the mistakes that destroyed it.

Is Somalia salvageable? An analyst cannot even begin to answer that question. "Ifs" are all that an analyst can offer. If one actor becomes sufficiently coherent and powerful to impose itself on the others, then Somalia might become a political subject again. Alternatively, if enough factions reconciled with one another, Somalia might be salvaged. If external actors/powers/players let Somalia coalesce either by force or consensus, Somalia might exist in the perceptual political word. What an analyst can attempt to do is to assess what analyst-theorist Ahmed Egal calls the fundamental and basic dynamics of "fission" and "fusion" in politics – are factions/units tending to divide or unite? Are their interests convergent or divergent? What is the balance of power among the actors? Solidarity and division; strength and weakness.

The Past Year

In order to make a projection for 2011, it is necessary to know the positions of the domestic and external actors composing the conjuncture of organized interests in Somalia's politics as they have developed/changed during 2010. Modern-classical-realist political-science-based analysis, such as guides the present writing, always takes its starting point from the concrete present situation. What political forces are active? What ideal entities also are organized political subjects, even if some or all of them are divided by factionalism within? Who gets to play, who has the power to play? All projections come from the present; indeed, for an analyst they are simply extrapolations of the present. Look for creativity elsewhere; the analyst is (methodologically) conservative; the future is projected on the basis of the present configuration of power.

The territories of post-independence Somalia will serve as what will be called "Somalia" in order to bring together the conjuncture of its shattered pieces. Although Somalia as a political subject does not exist on the ground, post-independence Somalia did once exist and has sufficient strength as an idea

projected forward to organize the conjuncture for the analyst. “Somalia,” then, in its death as a reality, lives on as the signifier that organizes the discourse of its “parts.” (Saying “part,” of course, begs the question and grants the discursive power to “Somalia.”)

The conjuncture of Somalia’s politics includes, as its most significant actors, the provisionally autonomous regional state of Puntland; the self-declared independent state of Somaliland ; the internationally-recognized Transitional Federal Government (T.F.G.); the armed Islamist revolutionary opposition to the T.F.G. (Harakat al-Shabaab Mujahideen – H.S.M.); the African Union (A.U.), which originates the peacekeeping mission (AMISOM) that protects the T.F.G. in an enclave of “Somalia’s” capital Mogadishu; the Western donor powers and I.G.O.s that fund the T.F.G. and AMISOM. Puntland occupies the northeastern section of post-independence Somalia, Somaliland its northwestern section; the T.F.G. part of post-independence Somalia’s capital al, with de jure sovereignty over all of post-independence Somalia, according to international powers; the H.S.M. most of the southern and central section of “Somalia” and ambition to control all of it.

The conjuncture contains other significant actors, some of which have been and/or might become major actors. There are Somalia’s neighboring states, Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti; Arab states looking for political and economic influence; the Islamist donors to and revolutionary movements affiliated with H.S.M.; the Ogaden National Liberation Front (O.N.L.F.) that wages an armed war of liberation in Ethiopia’s Somali Regional State; regional authorities in southern and central Somalia, some of them established (Galmudug, Himan and Heeb, Ahlu Sunna wal-Jamaa), others contesting H.S.M.’s control and loosely linked to the T.F.G.; and the S.S.C. liberation movement that calls for independence of territories disputed between Somaliland and Puntland.

Each of the actors in the conjuncture is further divided into factions in varying degrees of conflict and interest divergence.

The foregoing gives a hint of the conjuncture composing Humpty-Dumpty and “all the king’s horses and all the king’s men” who could not put Humpty together again.

The basic political situation of post-independence Somalia at the end of 2010 is one of persistence of fragmentation, stasis and conflict among the major players in the conjuncture. There is neither momentum towards the imposition of a solution by a dominating actor nor a negotiated solution. Each actor is checked by the others due to lack of sufficient power or the determination to use available power. It is a frenzied dancing in place, an aggressive stalemate. Nonetheless, the actors have changed during 2010, not in the sense of any of them having gained or lost decisively in the balance of power, but by shifting their strategies within the extant power configuration.

The big changes of 2010:

1. Puntland becomes more independent of the T.F.G. and donor policy.
2. Somaliland effects a successful transfer of political power.
3. The T.F.G. gets a new administration.
4. H.S.M. incorporates the Islamist armed-opposition group Hizbul Islam (H.I.), consolidating armed opposition to the T.F.G. backed by AMISOM and Western donor powers (most importantly Washington).
5. The African supporters of the T.F.G. centered on AMISOM and its troop-contributing countries Burundi and especially Uganda split with Western donors after H.S.M. bombs venues in Kampala broadcasting the World Cup and the Africans urge aggressive military action against H.S.M. and the donors refuse.
6. The Western donors led by Washington adopt a “dual-track” policy dropping exclusive support for the T.F.G. and moving tentatively towards dealing directly with Puntland, Somaliland and sub-administrations without recognizing them.

Puntland

As the stasis has persisted, Puntland’s administration led by President Abdirahman Mohamed Farole appears to have decided to pursue a policy that positions it as more independent of the T.F.G. than it had been previously. Whether this move leads in the direction of declaring independence will depend on Puntland’s success in moving the T.F.G. and its international supporters towards a “federalist” formula for post-independence Somalia that gives Puntland a generous autonomy in regulating its internal affairs and development.

At present the situation cuts two ways. Whereas past T.F.G. administrations had included a president or prime minister from Puntland’s dominant northern Darod clan family, the new T.F.G. administration’s prime minister is a southern Darod, Mohamed Farmajo. The change in the T.F.G. has led to a perceived loss of influence in the T.F.G. by Puntland. Washington’s dual-track policy, on the other hand, could convince Puntland to stick with the T.F.G. if the donors demanded that it be executed with Puntland’s affiliation with the T.F.G.

Puntland has been disaffected with both the T.F.G. and the donors, although it desires aid and diplomatic support from the latter. The administration claims that it has not been consulted on the future of Somalia when the T.F.G.’s mandate is either extended beyond August 2011, or the T.F.G. is replaced by a permanent government. Puntland has also been rebuffed by the donors on its appeals for aid to build anti-piracy bases on the region’s coast. On the first issue, Puntland has proposed that it hold a broad reconciliation conference for post-independence Somalia and, on the second, it has signed an agreement with a private security firm, Saracen International, funded by an unnamed “Muslim country” (a trusted closed sources says it is the United Arab Emirates), to train an anti-piracy force.

By edging towards a more independent position towards the T.F.G. and donors, if not independence, Puntland has put itself into play, complicating the conjuncture for other actors. Puntland always had the independence card up its sleeve; now it is edging into the open. Score one for fission, unless there is a “federalist” outcome for Puntland that satisfies its interests in security and resource autonomy. Puntland seems to have judged that it has waited long enough for the T.F.G. and the donors to satisfy its interests, and that it intends either to push them or go it alone to a greater degree and augment its “partners.”

Somaliland

Although its 2010 presidential election was marred by low turnout and connected dissent in the S.S.C. regions that erupted into violent incidents, Somaliland achieved a generally peaceful transfer of power among political parties in which Mohamed Silanyo (Kulmiye) replaced Dahir Riyale Kahin (U.D.U.B.). The election increased the credibility of Somaliland’s bid for international recognition of its self-declared independence, adding to the tendencies towards fission in post-independence Somalia. Somaliland’s political parties are all committed to the independence agenda; Kulmiye appears to have decided to go slow in order to get aid from the West, but it is not envisioning entry into a larger “Somalia.”

Silanyo recognizes that the S.S.C. regions present a problem to Somaliland’s integrity; the regions that it disputes with Puntland are populated by northern Darod, some of whom desire union with Puntland; others who seek autonomy within the T.F.G./“Somalia”, and others who support Somaliland, which has an Isaaq clan majority. Much of Somaliland’s success depends upon its ability to keep conflict from spiking in the S.S.C. regions, which along with the rest of Somaliland form the former British colony of British Somaliland, the borders of which form Somaliland’s claim to independence.

It is in neither Somaliland’s nor Puntland’s current perceived interests to engage in military conflict over the S.S.C. regions, and it is in both of their interests to cooperate in fighting H.S.M., which threatens them both, and to maximize Western development aid to each; yet the possibility of war between them is genuine, particularly as/if Puntland becomes more independent. Ethiopia, on which both states depend, has an interest in preventing a war as it attempts to keep them separate, which leads to the persistence of stasis. How the donors’ dual-track policy is implemented, to the extent that it is, will influence the possibility of armed conflict between Somaliland and Puntland.

At present, Somaliland continues to proceed on its own time. Its basic problem is for the Silanyo administration to demonstrate that it is not destructively partisan and is accommodating to non-Kulmiye political forces. At the end of 2010, it appears that Silanyo has kept factionalism at bay and is moving to take advantage of the Western dual-track policy.

T.F.G.

While Puntland and Somaliland are organized polities holding territory and more-or-less enforcing laws, the T.F.G. is, in the main, an aspirational expression. Protected by AMISOM and confined territorially to part of Mogadishu, the T.F.G. is a creature of external powers that is dependent on outside money (“donors”), guns (“donors”), military protection (A.U.-AMISOM), and international recognition that grants it formal sovereignty over all of post-independence Somalia. The T.F.G. has institutions occupied by politicians representing simply themselves or fragmented and localized religious, clan, warlord factions; but no way of implemented any decisions that it might be able to reach, if its factions were to gain any coherence. The T.F.G.: a divided government without an administration, no policy of its own, dependent on external actors; yet, because of what those external actors pump into it, a constant attractor of any number of interests and Somali factions with hopes of using the T.F.G. as an instrument.

In 2010, the T.F.G. went through another of its changes in “administration” that resulted from one of its endemic factional power struggles and pressure from external actors. The appointment of Somali-American Mohamed Farmajo as prime minister to replace Omar Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke marked simultaneously a way of satisfying donors (for the first time, the cabinet was laced with “technocrats” from the Diaspora, rather than the old sectoral and self-dealing politicians), and a way of enhancing the “power” (position in the T.F.G.) of the faction associated with T.F.G. president, Sh. Sharif Sh. Ahmad.

At present, the T.F.G. remains in a state of political limbo. Its mandate expires “legally” in August 2011, and it has a draft constitution for a permanent state apparatus; but it has neither the power nor the will to carry through the nationwide process that would give permanent state-formation any effectiveness or, more importantly, legitimacy. Therefore, it is most likely that the mandate of the T.F.G. will be extended, which would be to the benefit of the Sh. Sharif faction.

What becomes of the T.F.G. does not depend on itself, but on what the Somali interests contending for it do with it and, decisively, what the external actors do with it. Do the donor powers go full tilt and get military control for the T.F.G.? Do they diminish the T.F.G. by shifting attention to Somaliland and Puntland? Do they keep it as they have done on a stingy military-political I.V. drip that keeps it formally in place without giving it the ability to govern, which the donors believe it could not do – and probably could not.

That the T.F.G. is a maze of political maneuvering spinning in a void cannot be laid at the doorstep of Somali politicians who simply take advantage of the situation, but is attributable to those with the power - the donors and regional states – that created and now maintain a political expression that they have made too weak to govern, yet capable of taking money and some guns, and playing political games.

H.S.M.

Controlling most of the southern and central territories of post-independence Somalia, including at least half of Mogadishu, H.S.M. in 2010 succeeded in consolidating revolutionary Islamist forces into its organization by absorbing/merging-with H.I., leaving the Islamist alternative in the hands of its most radical, uncompromising and transnationalist element. At the same time, divisions within H.S.M. surfaced after the failure of its Ramadan offensive against the T.F.G. and AMISOM in Mogadishu that led to disputes over strategy and ideology.

H.S.M., which proposes to establish an emirate in post-independence Somalia linked to a caliphate, faces the challenge of reconciling its hardline transnationalist wing with its more nationalist wing, the first of which tends towards ideological purity and the second of which is more pragmatic and ideologically comprehensive. The power struggle in H.S.M. is affected by the absorption of H.I., which is closer to the pragmatic wing and strengthens the latter.

H.S.M. ends 2010 in the throes of the stasis that grips post-independence Somalia; it is strong enough, at present, to maintain its control in the regions that it holds and to build its administrations, but it is too weak to extend itself beyond them – it appears to have lost momentum and the initiative that it appeared to have before the Ramadan offensive. If H.S.M. is unable to recover initiative and momentum, it risks weakened unity as clan politics and localism assert themselves and transnational Islamist support diminishes. Opposed by local and regional interests loosely allied to the T.F.G., but increasingly autonomist, a weakened H.S.M. might lose opportunistic support on the ground. Being able to reconcile its internal split would increase the likelihood of its regaining initiative and momentum, enhanced by its monopolization of Islamist opposition.

All of a sudden, H.S.M. has gotten old, just another player with a familiar hand, among the other players. Stasis has taken some of the impetus out of revolution; H.S.M. is a force to be reckoned with by the others, and the others are forces to be reckoned with by H.S.M.

African Union-AMISOM-Donor Powers

The coalition surrounding and inflating the T.F.G., and opposing H.S.M., showed fissures, though not yet severe fractures or breaks, in 2010. H.S.M.'s bombing of World Cup audiences in Kampala spurred the A.U., Somalia's neighboring states, and AMISOM contributors, especially Uganda, to push for a more aggressive and assertive approach to fighting H.S.M., against reluctant Western donor powers working through the United Nations Security Council.

The A.U. and associated states and their sub-regional organization, I.G.A.D., wanted the U.N. to expand AMISOM's mandate from peacekeeping to peace enforcement, impose an air and naval blockade on airports and seaports controlled by H.S.M., boost the number of AMISOM forces to 20,000 from 8,000, and provide generous logistical and financial support to AMISOM. The donors responded by boosting the number of mandated AMISOM forces to 12,000 and leaving the rest of the existing situation in place, insuring that stasis will persist unless the donors step up their efforts significantly or abandon "Somalia" to deal with its divisions, neither of which is as likely as an attempt to maintain the status quo.

The donors are first of all simply unwilling to spend the money necessary and provide the diplomatic efforts required to do the job that they say they would like to be done. “Somalia” is not highest on the list of their priorities and just as importantly they are not convinced that the T.F.G. can be made viable and that the A.U./AMISOM could effectively take charge of southern and central Somalia without substantial Western-U.N. commitment. Instead, led by Washington, the donor powers, frustrated by the stasis that they have in greatest part created, are tentatively and half-heartedly pursuing the new dual-track policy, in which they continue to back the T.F.G. but also deal directly with Puntland, Somaliland and sub-regional “administrations” in southern and central “Somalia” – not really a new strategy but a bet-hedging exercise that weakens the T.F.G. and encourages tendencies towards fission and that might involve the donors in local conflicts that they are anxious to avoid. Given the pitfalls of the dual-track policy, the donors are likely to be unwilling to carry it through effectively.

The “donor” POWERS are not willing to empower their clients and they are not willing to leave them alone and they are not willing to step in and take responsibility. It is not that “all the king’s horses and all the king’s men” cannot put Humpty-Dumpty together again, but that they refuse to let the poor casualty try to reconstitute itself, much less to give aid and comfort in the process.

2011: Some questions to consider:

1. Will Puntland move towards declaring independence or separating itself de facto? Or will it hang in with “Somalia” because of external pressure and inducements?
2. Will Somaliland become a strong inclusive polity? Or will it weaken through falling into partisanship and/or through pressure from H.S.M. and the S.S.C. regions?
3. Will the T.F.G.’s term be extended or will there be an effort to institute a new (constitutional) order?
4. Will H.S.M. resolve its internal dispute and successfully assimilate H.I., or will it weaken through its divisions, limited power, and resultant pressures from its adversaries and diminishing support?
5. Will AMISOM move towards withdrawal, having been placed in a stalemated situation by insufficient donor-power support, or will African wishes for robust donor-power support be met?
6. Will donor powers continue to procrastinate, implement half-hearted stop-gap measures, defer decision, and therefore perpetuate stasis? Or will they make a decision either to commit or draw back?
7. Will another player enter the conjuncture in a significant way, such as an Arab state, a collection of Arab states, or a complex of Arab interests?

The above are the questions posed for the major actors in the conjuncture of political interest and power among the fragments of post-independence Somalia.

Before one can even begin to consider whether “Somalia” might be reclaimed, it is necessary that the stasis that forces each actor to dance in place be broken. At present, some actors have the will to move but not the means, and others possibly have the means but not the will. As long as this condition persists, 2011 will be a continuation of 2010, in which dividing lines become more sharply etched and tendencies toward polarization increase without the underlying stasis-fragmentation having been altered.

At present, the only actor that could plausibly change the game is the Washington-led Western-U.N. donor-power coalition, which is the one that has power and is not using it, and that lacks the will to do so, based on its judgment (self-conscious or not) that it is too inconvenient (and perhaps counter-productive) to commit, and too dangerous (H.S.M.) to withdraw.

The deepest structure of the politics of post-independence Somalia is post/neo-colonialism versus transnational Islamist anti-(Western) colonialist resistance. Somali political actors are constrained to work within that power configuration/struggle.

A popular Somali national movement united against neo-colonialism and transnationalist jihad, or a similar movement of Somali political elites – whichever one might come first and generate the other – is what would put Humpty-Dumpty together again. 2010 provides no basis for projecting the appearance of an operative Somali political identity in 2011.

-Michael A. Weinstein