

By the mid-1990s, it was clear to the world that Somalia had become Africa's first [failed post-colonial state](#). But this vast country of just 10 million people had had a glorious history before this calamity. It was the [first to enjoy a democratic transfer of power](#) on the continent, in 1964 and 1967.

In the 1960s, Somalia developed a reputation for running the most democratic elections on the continent. At the time the continent was mired in dictatorships, suffering under bloody military coups and lumbering under single party rule.

This glorious history is little known. Better known is the [chaos of the last 30 years](#). In these years, Somalia has endured the most retrogressive and violent civil war engineered by one of the most sectarian African political elite in the continent today.

Is there any chance that this might change? Can the Somali people rise from the ashes?

I believe not, unless two of the key drivers to the Somali disaster are understood - and acted on. The first is that the political and security order - which numerous foreign actors have been investing in - has produced marginal benefits for ordinary people. And it has failed to defeat Al-Shabaab.

Second, this order is built on the reification of a divisive apartheid-like political formula based on ethnic lines.



Image source: CFR.org

Indigenous revolution snuffed

In 2006, after a decade-and-a-half of cruel civil war, the Union of Islamic Courts, a home grown alliance of religious leaders, [terminated 15 years of warlords' terror and tyranny](#). They pacified Mogadishu and surrounding areas and were about to set up local administration for the city and the surrounding settlements.

But the initiative was short lived. The international community, led by the US, reversed this local initiative, and [empowered](#) a government dominated by warlords.

US (and foreign) influence was further consolidated after 2008 - the year Washington listed Al-Shabaab as a terrorist organisation. Since then, the US and its allies have spent billions of dollars on illusive security and superficial development that has failed to improve the capacity of Somalis to take charge of their future.

In addition, they have endorsed a tribal-based federal system advanced by the sectarian factions of the Somali political elite. This political cocktail has produced a context in which violence has become part of the population's daily life under the shadow of a thoroughly

corrupt and hopelessly inept government.

The [African Union force](#) in Somalia, fully financed by the US and the European Union, claims to have pushed Al-Shabaab from Mogadishu and other major cities. But it has failed to defeat the terrorist organisation. This is due to the conventional warfare strategy it has adopted as well as its inability to mobilise the local population for self-defence.

As a result, Al-Shabaab, which has about 5,000 combatants, controls most rural areas. The group efficiently collects ransom (taxes) from all businesses, most notably in the capital city. This is due to the absence of a strong and effective police force in the capital.



Gunmen Storm Somalia Government Building, Killing Minister and Others.- Image source: The New York Times

Al-Shabaab's resilience is undergirded by the international community's disorganised efforts at rebuilding a unified and integrated Somali defence and police forces.

Ethnicity as political identity

Foreign actors, including the African Union, back a political scheme that segregates Somalis into exclusive genealogical units in all spheres of political and public life. The country is divided into tribal regions. Parliamentary representation, ministerial appointments and employment in civil and security services (as well as the judiciary) are all based on tribal identity.

Each region is the preserve of a particular genealogical group. And each government department is the fiefdom of a certain tribe. The fundamental political effect of these divisions has been that Somalis cohabit the same national territory, but share little common civic agenda that can guide rebuilding their country.

Such reinvention of colonial and apartheid-like political order has created superficial and short term stability in pockets of the country. But this has been at the cost of country-wide insecurity, and economic and social progress.



Image source: ECFR.eu

This tribal-based political scheme is accepted under the false notion that it reflects Somali tradition. But it only fits the designs of a sectarian faction of the Somali political elite, and

their erstwhile ally in Ethiopia, the late prime minister Meles Zenawi.

The current order is an amalgam of two totally contradictory systems. A public sector that is supposed to be inclusive and democratic, and an exclusive tribal-based politics. This mixture has produced a dysfunctional order inept in all of its operations except in looting public resources and alienating Somalis from each other.

The hope?

The grand designs of the major political and military actors lack an important ingredient: the views and the hopes of ordinary Somalis. Most Somalis have consistently rejected political tribalism as they so clearly recognise that such politics and policies are the root causes of their privations.

Over [70% of the Somali people are under 30 years](#) of age. Yet this group has had no say in redesigning the country's reconstruction strategy. But the imminent political transition due to the expiration of the current leadership's term of office will reproduce past disasters.

The most recent political conflict between the president and the opposition is about the rule of law and the sanctity of the provisional constitution. The president wants to extend his term of office for two more years after his tenure expired in February while the constitution forbids it. In addition, the president has been [stoking ethnic sentiments](#) to boost his illegal and illegitimate effort to stay in power.



Image source: UN News

Fortunately, the people of the capital clearly understand transforming political conflict into an ethnic one will be catastrophic and have refused to take the president's bait.

The African Union, whose troops guard the presidency and much of the capital, has a moral and political obligation to thwart the president's unconstitutional gerrymandering. Without a decisive AU intervention, the country appears destined to return to mindless civil strife.

Thus, the African Union has a fleeting opportunity at this eleventh hour to honour its motto of "African solutions for African problems". It should challenge the president's attempt to cling to power, and other sectarian Somali actors. Rather than endorsing a divisive agenda the AU must insist that conflating ethnic and political identity is disastrous not only for Somalia, but anywhere in the continent.

Such a stance will inspire young Somalis to aspire differently. They have shown [willingness to jettison political tribalism](#) and could yet rediscover the golden roots of Africa's first democrats. Young Somalis [are ready for the challenge](#) - is the AU?

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