PROSPECTS FOR PEACE: 
CHANGES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

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The Horn of Africa in the Changing World Climate

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For many years, the political landscape in the Horn of Africa has been as shifting and unpredictable as the desert sands. In addition to ever-changing inter-state alignments, the region has been plagued by serious and long-running civil wars, persistent droughts, incredible poverty, massive famine, a large number of refugees, economic mismanagement and severe environmental degradation. To a certain extent, the Horn represents a microcosm of the problems that afflict the entire world. Most of these problems have been with the region for more than two decades, but they have been exacerbated by heightened political instability and uncertainty since the late 1980s. By the early 1990s, the old political order was beginning to give way. President Mohammed Siad Barre, who had ruled Somalia since October 1969, was ousted in January 1991, while President Mengistu Haile Mariam, who had governed Ethiopia since February 1977, fled the country in May 1991. Sadly, their departures did not bring about an end to their countries' political and economic misery. Sudan, where the military took power in June 1989, has also been going through one of its worst crises in decades.

During the Cold War, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan received varying levels of assistance from either the East or the West, and could, within limits, play one Superpower against the other. Ethiopia enjoyed American support from the 1950s until 1977, when it turned to the Soviet Union under Mengistu's leadership. Moscow, whose influence in Ethiopia soared as a result, provided Ethiopia with more than $14 billion worth of arms in the 1970s and 1980s. During much of this period, the Ethiopian regime was buttressed by a large contingent of Cuban troops, some South Yemeni forces and East Germany advisers. Most of these departed in the late 1980s. Neighbouring Somalia also benefited from US military and economic assistance between 1981 and 1989, in return for allowing American military forces access to its facilities. Previously, Somalia had obtained large quantities of arms from the USSR and played host to significant Soviet naval facilities at the Indian Ocean port of Berbera. The break between Somalia and the USSR came as a result of Moscow's decision to help Ethiopia repulse a Somali invasion in 1977. Sudan, especially during the leadership of Gaafar Numeiri, received Soviet military aid in the early 1970s. But from the mid-1970s, Numeiri obtained considerable military and economic assistance from Washington. Numeiri was also adept at manipulating the
Libyan 'threat' to obtain American assistance, especially during the Reagan presidency.

Following the changes in East-West relations in the 1980s, the collapse of Communism and the political whirlwind that swept Eastern Europe from 1989, the Horn has suffered benign neglect from Moscow and Washington. During the Cold War, some critics argued that the Superpower presence was a cause of instability in the Horn; but their departure has revealed that without them the region is even more unstable. The Horn, already on the periphery of world politics like the rest of the Third World, with the exception of the Persian Gulf, has been further marginalized by Western policies that have focused on the reforming Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the throes of political rejuvenation. Moscow, for long an alternative source of economic and military assistance, is itself competing with hapless Third World countries for limited resources in Western capitals. The 1991 Gulf War and its aftermath have also helped shift attention away from the Horn, thereby accentuating the region's multiple problems.

In the meantime, the Horn, previously regarded as a strategically important region, has discovered it has little intrinsic strategic value. Even its proximity to the strategically significant Persian Gulf has not helped; this was demonstrated in the first few weeks of January 1991, when the change of government in Somalia did not catch the attention of senior policy-makers in Western countries, except Italy. The US, in protest against human rights violations, had cut aid to Somalia in mid-1989, while the USSR also reduced its presence in Ethiopia considerably after 1989; Moscow eventually cut military supplies following the expiry of the Soviet-Ethiopian agreement in January 1991. As the Superpowers have become less of a factor in the regional equation in the early 1990s, some Middle Eastern countries, including Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Syria have increased their involvement in the region, a development which is likely to provide a new source of uncertainty in the future.

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, who had supported Ethiopia's former leader Mengistu until the late 1980s, strengthened ties with Siad Barre of Somalia and Omar Beshir of Sudan in the late 1980s. Iraq also increased support to Sudan and to the Eritrean guerrillas in 1989 and 1990.

By far the most significant development in the area since the late 1980s has undoubtedly been Israel's re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Ethiopia, which had been broken off in the wake of the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Israel's primary interests in Ethiopia have been partly cultural and partly strategic. It sought the emigration of an estimated 18,000 Falashas (Ethiopian Jews) to Israel, 14,000 of whom were evacuated just before Addis Ababa was captured by the rebel forces in May 1991. Israel has also been concerned with Arab activities in the Horn, and it feels that the secession of Eritrea (which occasionally receives Arab aid) could turn the
Red Sea into an Arab 'lake'. Mengistu, on the other hand, had sought military assistance from Israel, and wanted also to use Israel as an opening to the United States.

As of June 1991, the political situation in Ethiopia was quite volatile. The new administration, under former guerrilla leader Meles Zenawi, had been unable to establish order and most Ethiopians continued to question its legitimacy. In Somalia, Siad Barre’s successor, former businessman Ali Mahdi Mohammed, had been unable to restore basic services in Mogadishu or to prevent the northern part of the country from seceding. In Sudan, the military strongman, General Omar Beshir, had been unable to come to an understanding with the resistance forces in southern Sudan, and the country still faced deep-rooted political and security problems, while the Sharia (Islamic law), which had ignited the civil war in the early 1980s, was being implemented. The immediate result of this political instability has been the flow of a large number of refugees across boundaries.

The great complexity of both internal and intra-regional problems in the Horn poses difficulties for analysts and policy-makers alike. The political terrain seems forever shifting; patterns can be difficult to discern; and predictions - other than that the situation will remain volatile - are hazardous. Nevertheless, this chapter attempts to map the major features of the changing political fortunes in Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan since the end of the Cold War.

Ethiopia: New Leadership - More Uncertainty

Ethiopia is a key country in the Horn, and its problems often have repercussions in neighbouring Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia and Sudan. Ethiopia also occupies a special place in Africa, as the headquarters of the Organization of African Unity and the UN Economic Commission for Africa. As one of the oldest Christian nations in the world, whose people claim direct descent from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, Ethiopia possesses a mystique which no other African country has. Always going for the high prototype, Ethiopia has also played a bigger role in the Cold War than any other sub-Saharan African country. It was host to an American military communications base from the 1950s until the mid-1970s; thereafter, it played host to the largest Soviet and Cuban military presence on the African continent. The US has once again signalled its reassertion of influence in Ethiopia by sponsoring the May 1991 London talks on Ethiopia’s future and by authorizing the rebel Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) guerrillas to occupy Addis Ababa. The question is whether Washington and the EPRDF leadership view Ethiopia’s problems and their solutions from the same angle. It is, in fact, doubtful that the EPRDF, in its present form, has the vision and ability to lead Ethiopia quickly out of its political and economic mess. Moreover, if Mengistu's
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leadership lacked legitimacy, it is hard to see how the EPRDF leadership can convince Ethiopians of its legitimacy.

Mengistu's escape to Zimbabwe in May 1991 was hailed as a great opportunity for Ethiopians to establish peace and stability, but that appeared to be a narrow interpretation of Ethiopia's multifaceted problems. Ethiopia's difficulties were no doubt exacerbated by Mengistu's dictatorial rule and his misguided macro-economic policies; but, most of them predate his leadership. Even before the Mengistu era, Ethiopia was economically backward, had an authoritarian and centralized political structure, its various nationalities felt oppressed and the war in Eritrea had been going on for years. In the light of this situation, Meles Zenawi has a daunting task ahead. He needs to maintain Ethiopia's territorial integrity while conceding autonomy to different nationalities; he needs to allow basic freedoms without leaving the country to drift into anarchy; he also needs to create an atmosphere conducive to foreign investment. The most difficult task, however, is how to dismantle Mengistu's political and economic structures without antagonizing those who have benefited from his programmes, especially his land reform policies.

For generations, imperial, and later Marxist, Ethiopia has been ruled by centralized and repressive governments which have been completely oblivious to popular demands. The imperial government, which had lasted more than 2,000 years when it was terminated in 1974, had ruled provinces through dynasties appointed centrally, and most of them originated from Shoa and Tigray provinces. By the 1970s, most Ethiopians wanted change, but when it came, it was 'hijacked' by the military. The Dergue (military junta), which overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, also maintained central control over the regions and provinces. In practice, Mengistu's policies combined some elements of the Ethiopian imperial tradition and Marxist-Leninist principles. It might appear a contradiction in terms, but Mengistu ruled, lived and acted like a 'Leninist Tsar'.

The Dergue, of which Mengistu was an original member, initially cooperated closely with radical civilian intellectuals, who helped it espouse socialism and provided some policy guidance. Its alliance with intellectuals was a tactical ploy designed to rally opponents of the imperial regime. The Dergue was also anxious to demonstrate that its intervention was prompted by the uneven distribution of wealth and the existing archaic and unrepresentative political order, which it sought to change. Its socialist programme was concerned with self-reliance, the dignity of labour and the indivisibility of Ethiopian unity, hence the use of the slogan Ethiopia Tikdem (Ethiopia First).

By 1976, Mengistu had emerged as one of the main forces behind the secretive Dergue, and in February 1977, he assumed absolute power following a bloody confrontation with, and the assassination of, the former head of state, General Teferi Benti. In the next 18 months, Mengistu turned
against the radical civilian organizations, including the Trotskyite Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and its arch-rival the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (MEISON). The EPRP, which drew most of its support from the intelligentsia and students, was intensely against praetorianism. MEISON, on the other hand, had initially served as political advisers to the Dergue and had provided ideological guidance to soldiers. The two organizations were banned and most of their leaders executed during the struggle of the Dergue-spearheaded 'revolutionary red terror' against what the Dergue termed 'counter-revolutionary terror' in 1977.

It was after Mengistu had eliminated all his rivals, both civilian and military, that he agreed to establish the Commission for Organizing the Party of the Workers of Ethiopia (COPWE), which later led to the formation of the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE), the first ever political party in Ethiopia, in September 1984. The WPE followed the standard procedures of a Soviet-style communist party, but, unlike the CPSU which has a federal structure, the Ethiopian party was centralized. Although theoretically the party operated on the principle of collective leadership, in practice Mengistu's word was law. Other political institutions like the Cabinet, the National Shengo (Parliament) and the civil service were subordinate to the party.

In the few years preceding his departure from the political scene, Mengistu had come under considerable pressure from Western powers, especially the United States, to show more respect for human rights and to liberalize the political system. In March 1990, he had announced a package of measures designed to encourage political pluralism, including the proposal to change the name of the ruling party from the WPE to the Ethiopian Democratic Unity Party and to widen its membership to accommodate opposition groups, but his critics dismissed them as a transparent attempt to buy more time. The 1987 Constitution, which turned Ethiopia into a 'People's Democratic Republic', still referred to a one-party state and the idea of turning the WPE into a wider, more pluralistic front merely succeeded in upsetting WPE members without satisfying the demands for democracy. Mengistu also recommended a gradualistic switch from a centrally planned economy to a market one, but the bulk of his economic measures were greeted with cynicism, because Ethiopia had no proper investment codes to encourage foreign investment. Just before his departure, Mengistu had again tried to placate his opponents by reshuffling his Cabinet and naming Tesfaye Dinka, former Foreign Minister, as the new Prime Minister, but that attempt did not ease the pressure on him.

The main challenges to Mengistu since the 1970s came from two resistance movements which have now gained power, namely the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Both movements achieved extensive military gains between 1989 and 1991, eventually forcing Mengistu to flee. Although the EPLF
and the TPLF were united against Mengistu, their victory is likely to put them at odds with each other, because of their inherently conflicting goals.

The EPLF, which established itself as a breakaway faction of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in 1971, has always sought full independence for Eritrea, the former Italian colony that was federated with Ethiopia under UN auspices in 1952. Emperor Haile Selassie unilaterally dissolved the federal arrangement in 1961 and reduced Eritrea to the status of a province. That move prompted the establishment of the Muslim-led ELF, which wanted autonomy restored.

In due course the ELF lost its military potency, and since the mid-1970s, the EPLF has been the most effective resistance group in Eritrea. The EPLF’s Secretary-General, Issaias Afwerki, has indicated that the movement would like to organize a referendum to determine the views of the Eritrean people on the independence issue, but that is only a tactical ploy because the EPLF will not accept anything short of full independence. Following the departure of Mengistu, the EPLF established an ‘interim’ administration independent of Addis Ababa, pending a referendum. That step has left Ethiopia without its own port, because both Assab and Massawa on the Red Sea are within Eritrea, and Zenawi will find it hard to convince Ethiopians that their country can do without Eritrea. Zenawi’s first political test is whether he can safeguard Ethiopia’s territorial integrity by re-establishing control over Eritrea.

Zenawi’s own organization, the TPLF, was established in 1975 with the help of the EPLF, and is not, therefore, in a position to challenge the EPLF’s goal of achieving independence for Eritrea. It emerged on the wave of strong resentment in Tigray province against the Dergue’s land reform policies, which had been welcomed in the southern part of Ethiopia. The TPLF, which until recently has been effectively controlled by the pro-Albanian Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray, operated almost entirely in Tigray province. The movement initially demanded autonomy for Tigray province, but because Tigray has been a part of Ethiopia for more than 2,000 years, the TPLF could not credibly stake a claim for secession. Moreover, Tigray province is inhabited by other ethnic groups, including some Afars and Oromos, and these could not accept the TPLF as their legitimate representative. The TPLF also realized it could not claim to speak for all Tigrayans, because that would have conflicted with the EPLF, which is also led by Tigrinya-speakers.

The TPLF, therefore, sought to modify its image and goals in the early 1980s. In 1981, it played a leading role in the formation of the Amhara-dominated Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (EPDM) and in 1989 merged with the EPDM to form a new organization named the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). This manoeuvre was a transparent effort by the TPLF to change its image of a purely provincial ethnic organization and to gain some support from the Amhara, the leading
tribal grouping in Ethiopia, and other ethnic groups. By 1991, the EPRDF included several other resistance groups, such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Free Soldiers Movement (FSM). There has never been any doubt, however, that the TPLF, by virtue of its superior military force, has been the senior partner in the coalition and has controlled the agenda of the EPRDF. It was not surprising, therefore, that when the EPRDF captured Addis Ababa in May 1991, it was Zenawi, a TPLF leader, who emerged as Ethiopia's interim president.

That the EPRDF could switch from its admiration of the Albanian model and accept US guidance within months when the opportunity for leadership was dangled before it, is not remarkable. What is important is how quickly it can start the healing and reconciliation process. It needs not only to eschew its previous goals and policies, but it is expected to accept ideas and implement policies it never thought out itself. Although it always preached against Mengistu's policies, the EPRDF will find it imperative to accept the Dergue's land reform policies, especially as they applied in the south, if it wants cooperation from the majority of the Oromos.

The new leadership will also have to deal with the legacy of war. People at war for any extended period of time often find it difficult to adapt to peacetime normalcy, and there are many Ethiopians in this category. Most of these, including guerrilla forces and more than 300,000 undisciplined and armed Mengistu troops, might feel more comfortable with a Kalashnikov than a ploughshare. Indeed, Ethiopia has many people who have been uprooted or have lost the habit of working and know only how to fight. These people constitute a potentially destabilizing force against any government in Addis Ababa.

The fall of Mengistu and the subsequent loss of central control has given rise to other groups that are likely to render governing difficult for the Zenawi government. Other resistance forces in Ethiopia, which fought Mengistu on the sidelines, might in future present formidable problems for the new government. The reconciliation process therefore requires not only dealing with the former Mengistu supporters, but also making concessions to the anti-Mengistu forces.

Ethiopia's problems, however, seem to pale into insignificance in comparison with the disintegration and fighting that Somalia has gone through since the overthrow of Said Barre's government in January 1991.

Somalia: Disintegration and Anarchy

Following the overthrow of the octogenerian President Siad Barre in January 1991, the security situation in Somalia deteriorated beyond the predictions of most analysts. The new Somali leader, Ali Mahdi Mohammed, supported by the local wing of the United Somali Congress (USC), a resistance group that was established in 1989, has no resources, no army
worth the name or even a disciplined civil service with which to establish a respectable post-Barre government. In the confusion that preceded and followed the overthrow of the Barre regime, government offices and foreign embassies were looted, hospitals and schools were ravaged, and there was no water or power supply in the capital, Mogadishu, for months. Ali Mohammed was also installed in office promptly in controversial circumstances, without the approval of the USC headquarters in Rome or the support of other resistance movements, especially the more experienced Somali National Movement (SNM) and the Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM).

Given the lawlessness in the country, the squalid conditions in which most Somalis live and the continuous struggle for power in Mogadishu, it appears all Ali Mohammed has inherited is the anarchy left behind after 22 years of Barre's rule. It has been like putting old wine in new bottles, which makes no substantial difference. Unable to control Mogadishu, Ali Mohammed had no power to prevent the northern part of Somalia, the former British Somaliland, which had united with Italian Somaliland in 1960 to form the Somali Democratic Republic, from seceding in May 1991. All this has come at a time when virtually all foreign powers, except Italy, have abandoned Somalia.

The mounting political and economic problems in Somalia call for a leadership that can restore integrity in the political institutions, rebuild the economy and restore foreign confidence in the country. Before Barre's departure, a group of Somali and Italian lawyers had completed a draft of a new multi-party constitution for Somalia. But even then, a new constitution will make little difference in the anarchy that prevails in much of Somalia. Indeed, none of the envisaged reforms will be possible until Somali clans have stopped fighting each other.

Somalia's relative stability in the 1970s and early 1980s depended on Barre's skilful manipulation of both domestic and external politics. At the international level, the Cold War gave Barre some bargaining power through which he obtained substantial economic and military assistance, first from the Soviet Union and later from the United States. At the domestic level, he maintained power by often suppressing critics and detaining opponents; by balancing and playing on clan interests and rivalries; and, occasionally, by buying out opposition groups with cash. By the late 1980s, however, his external bargaining power had gone with the waning of the Cold War, and internally his military muscle had weakened due to inter- and intra-clan rivalries. It had also become increasingly obvious that he had neither the skill to manipulate sectional and regional interests nor the vision to lead the country quickly out of its political quagmire. Significantly, Barre's manipulative power waned as Somalia's economic problems multiplied, a fact which demonstrates the crucial role of the economy in what passes for political stability.
By the time Barre was toppled in January 1991, his government was corrupt, intensely unpopular and unable to exercise effective control even in Mogadishu. Barre had started as a nationalist dictator, with great regional ambitions. By the late 1980s, he was often referred to as the Mayor of Magadishu, because that was the only area of the country he controlled permanently, but even that title was removed from him as power was increasingly taken away from him and to no particular individual or group. The military, which had served as one of Barre’s pillars of power, had disintegrated into what looked like clan militias.

The civil service was totally demoralized and Barre’s Cabinet often functioned like a federation of clans in which power was commensurate with loyalty to the leader. At the same time, Barre had maintained an autocratic and centralized system which was totally inappropriate to the segmentary character of the Somali society.

For generations, the single most important factor in Somali society has been the clan. Although all Somalis enjoy a sense of common identity based on a shared culture, the clan loyalty often undercuts the sense of shared nationhood. Somalia’s ethnic problems are, however, different from those that afflict other African countries. While most African states are striving to create nations out of diverse ethnic groups, Somalia is basically a nation in search of a state. All Somalis belong to one ethnic group, speak the same language, and generally appear united by their devotion to Islam, but they also attach great significance to their clan family system. Their social and economic activities, as well as political organization, have traditionally stemmed from lineage systems based on one of the six major clan families - Darod, Digil, Dir, Hawiye, Issaq and Rahanwein.

The six family groups are further split into smaller clans and lineages. For instance, among the Darod clan family are the Dolbahante, Majerteen, Marehan and Ogadeni.

Somali clans play two contradictory roles, as centrifugal and centripetal forces, whereby there is solidarity against external threats and antagonism when the threat vanishes. For instance, Somalis appeared quite united in the periods when the government in Mogadishu pursued irredentist goals against neighbouring Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya, with a view to uniting all Somali-inhabited regions of the Horn into a Greater Somalia nation. Whenever the government sought peace with the neighbours, as was the case in the late 1960s and again in the 1980s, Somali clans turned against each other to try to find a scapegoat for their predicament. In the late 1980s, unrest had appeared in the armed forces shortly after Barre had agreed to the Somali-Ethiopian accord of April 1988, to end mutual hostilities and refrain from supporting each other’s opponents. The agreement, which also called for the demilitarization of the border and effectively amounted to Somalia’s renunciation of its claims to the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, was resented by Ogadenis in the Somali army. They felt their homeland had been
abandoned and directed their anger towards Barre.

Earlier in his tenure, Barre, who sought to transform Somali nationalism from its old segmentary kind to a modern organic mode, banned clanism and prohibited any reference to clans in the early 1970s. He adopted 'scientific socialism' in an effort to unite the nation. But, at the same time, he tried to consolidate his power base by relying on three clans from the Darod group: the Marehan, Ogadeni and Dolbahante. Most senior positions in the military and the civil service went to members of the three clans. Barre's advisers also came from the same sources, and in the 1970s, his government was often disparagingly referred to as MOD (Marehan, Ogadeni and Dolbahante). There is no doubt that clans and lineages are still a potent force and determine the course of Somalia's political development. Clan and lineage affiliations also have been vital in obtaining jobs, services and favours.

In the past, various family groupings often fought each other over access to grazing areas and water in a harsh environment; occasionally, there were armed conflicts even between segments of the same clan family. In some cases, temporary alliances were formed between clans of different families. The traditional social structure in Somalia was characterized by competition and conflicts between these clan-family groups. Indeed, clan conflicts and rivalries have been a feature of Somali politics for a long time.

Even the resistance groups in Somalia have been based on clans and have basically been seeking a bigger share of the political plums. The Somali National Movement (SNM), formed in 1981 and nurtured by the Ethiopian government, is dominated by the Issaq clan of northern Somalia. It started to wage war in northern Somalia in mid-1988, when it was forced to leave its Ethiopian bases, following the Somali-Ethiopian accord of April 1988. The SNM, because of its superior fighting force, had hoped it would be the one to form a successor regime after the overthrow of Barre, but when that happened in January 1991, it was the United Somali Congress (USC), dominated by the Hawiye clan of central Somalia, that formed an interim government. The USC was established in Rome in 1989 and did not have a strong fighting force until late 1990 when it was joined by many former army personnel who had defected from Barre's army. The third resistance group, which also emerged in 1989, is the Ogadeni-based Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM), which occupies southern Somalia.

After the overthrow of Barre, the three groups, and others, tried to work out a power-sharing formula, but it was not satisfactory to the SNM, who had borne the brunt of fighting more than any other group. From the moment Ali Mohammed was sworn in as interim president, it was clear the SNM was not going to cooperate with the new government, and its decision in May 1991 to declare northern Somalia independent from the rest of Somalia was done out of frustration. But, like the case of Eritrea, the secession of northern Somalia itself signifies the durability of African
colonial boundaries, which were drawn up in Berlin in 1884, without due regard for ethnic distribution in Africa. If northern Somalia secedes permanently, it would deprive the rest of the country of one of the most productive regions, known for livestock production. It also signals the further disintegration of Somalia, which instead of uniting all Somali-inhabited regions of the Horn, might split up into clan-based mini-states.

Any attempt by the new Somali government to address Somalia's present political and economic difficulties will not make much progress unless the Somalis are united. The trouble is that without some tangible political and economic rewards, it is hard to get the poverty-stricken clans to cooperate. With a per capita GDP of about US$170, Somalia is one of the poorest countries in the world. Its development over the years has been related to the amount of external financing, both as support in meeting domestic development expenditure and to pay for the imported materials and technical assistance components. Development has stagnated in the past few years because virtually all Western donors, except Italy, cut aid in 1989 in protest against Barre's human rights record and have not resumed supply. Without foreign assistance, Somalia's chances of economic recovery are virtually nil, but it is also hard to see how Western donors would resume aid to Somalia under the present circumstances. Thus Somalia's anarchic conditions discourage foreign aid and investment, yet it is only with such aid and investment that these problems can be overcome.

Another country in the Horn that has been abandoned by the West is Sudan, which also faces enormous political and economic problems.

Sudan: Islamic Intransigence

Oblivious to the chilling political developments in neighbouring states, the military government of General Hassan Omar Beshir in Sudan still tenuously clings to power. The challenge to Beshir comes from both the north and south of the country: northern politicians, who resent the massive erosion of their freedoms and the ban on political activities, want a civilian regime; in the south, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), led by John Garang, has been fighting for the political and economic rights of the southerners since 1983. As of this writing, the political atmosphere in Sudan is still overcast, and it might not be long before the SPLA takes effective control of southern Sudan.

Beshir came to office through a military coup on 30 June 1989, and has since consolidated power in Khartoum with the support of the Muslim Brotherhood. His rule has not only led to the erosion of people's freedoms, but it has also compounded the economic malaise in the country. In the meantime, Sudan's decade-old problems, which have revolved around the need for popular participation in the political process, the role of the Sharia (Islamic law), especially since 1983, and the autonomy of the southern
region, still remain.

Under Gaafar Numeiri's leadership from 1969 to 1985, Sudan experienced an authoritarian, corrupt and unpredictable regime. Numeiri, who came to power through a military coup, was suspicious of everybody and kept playing off one politician or political faction against another. In the course of his ideological zigzags, Numeiri alienated virtually all sections of the population at different times and forced most opposition groups into exile or underground. With a view to using the southern Sudanese against his adversaries in the north, Numeiri agreed to autonomy for the southerners in 1972. In the late 1970s, supported by the United States and Saudi Arabia, Numeiri engaged in a policy of 'national reconciliation' - an effort to bring his opponents home from exile and into the government. As he increasingly came under the influence of northern politicians who were hostile to the southerners, Numeiri decided to dismantle regional autonomy for the south in 1983. That move sparked off the civil war that still continues. Numeiri had differed sharply with Islamic fundamentalists and other religious groups in the early 1970s while he enjoyed the short-lived support of the local communists, whom he later persecuted. By the early 1980s, political opportunism led Numeiri to make peace with the Muslim Brotherhood, surprising even some of his close associates in 1983 when he announced suddenly the introduction of the Sharia in 1983.

When Numeiri was overthrown by General Abdulrahman Swareddahab in April 1985, it was expected that Sudan might once again move towards democracy. Within less than one year, Swareddahab permitted a multi-party system, and later handed power to a civilian government following the general elections of April 1986. But Sudan experimented with democracy for just three years before the civilian Prime Minister, Sadiq al-Mahdi, who had been indecisive on many important matters, was also toppled by General Hassan Omar Beshir in the coup of June 1989. Beshir, who has relied on Islamic fundamentalists to consolidate his power, abolished political parties, detained leading politicians, suspended the constitution and banned civilian newspapers. He has set out to implement the Sharia, but his authoritarian rule has plunged Sudan into a deeper crisis than the one he inherited. Beshir's regime is the only one in the region which has not responded positively to international pressures for political liberalization, and this is largely because of its reliance on the support of Islamic fundamentalist groups, who strongly resent external pressure.

Meanwhile, Sudan's insurgency problems, which stem from religious, cultural, racial and historical factors, have remained. The British colonial authorities, who ruled northern and southern Sudan as separate parts, accentuated already-existing animosities between northerners and southerners. During the colonial period, northerners could not travel to, or live in, the south without a special permit. Moreover, while Arabic was the language of instruction in northern schools, it was banned in the south and
English was used instead. As a result, the two parts of Sudan developed as completely different entities. As independence approached in the mid-1950s, the southerners, largely Christians and of African descent, feared domination by the Arab-Muslim northerners, and they accordingly demanded a federation, with a separate advisory council for the south. When their demands were rejected, the southerners rebelled in November 1955 and formed a guerrilla organization called Anyanya. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Anyanya leaders argued that the central government in Khartoum was dictatorial and discriminated against southerners on cultural and religious grounds. They continued fighting the government until Numeiri agreed to give them autonomy in 1972, and when that autonomy was taken away in 1983, fighting resumed, but this time the guerrilla group was the Sudan People's Liberation Army.

The establishment of the SPLA, and its political wing the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), in 1983, also was based on a combination of other political and economic issues, including the discovery of oil, the Jonglei Canal and the Sharia. The issue of oil became explosive shortly after crude oil had been discovered by the French firm, Chevron, at Bentiu in the south in 1979. Numeiri wanted to build a refinery in the north, but southerners wanted it built at Bentiu to stimulate the economy of their region. Numeiri later announced a plan for a pipeline to connect the south directly to the Red Sea for the export of crude oil, a move that made southerners feel they would receive little revenue from what they saw as their oil.

Numeiri's decision to construct the Jonglei Canal to make for a more efficient use of water from the River Nile also proved contentious. This project was conceived in the 1930s by Egyptians who felt that nearly half of the Nile water was lost through evaporation in the Sudd, and wanted to drain it through a canal. The Sudanese and Egyptian governments did not agree on the scheme until 1974, but it was deeply resented by southerners, who argued that the project was undertaken without sufficient consultation with them. Although it was planned that 25% of the water increase would be used in the south, the southerners felt the project was designed to serve the interests of Egypt and northern Sudan, and that it would disadvantage the south.

The controversy over the Jonglei Canal and a demand for a share of the oil revenue, were part of the accumulated grievances about inadequate development financing and the feeling that the south was being discriminated against in relation to the north. If southerners needed confirmation of their fears that the north was not ready to deal with them fairly, these issues, in addition to the imposition of the Sharia, provided it.

It was under these circumstances that the SPLA emerged. The movement, which received early support from Ethiopia and Libya, seeks the abolition of the Sharia and the establishment of a more democratic system.
in the whole of Sudan, but its military gains in the south might lead to de facto secession, that would not necessarily bring about peace to southern Sudan, because the region has more than 25 different ethnic groups and there are some differences among the major groups. Smaller tribes often fear that the secession of the southern region might lead to their domination by the numerically preponderant Dinka tribe, which controls the SPLA/SPLM.

In the 1980s, various Sudanese governments failed to come to terms with the SPLA to end the civil war. As of this writing, there is no indication that the two sides are any closer to a peaceful resolution of their dispute. Sadiq al-Mahdi - whose government at various times included his own Umma Party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the National Islamic Front (NIF) and minor southern parties - had proved ineffective and indecisive on the interrelated and sensitive questions of Islamic law and the civil war. The government's inability to reach even limited agreement was hardly surprising, for the three major parties that made up the coalition held virtually irreconcilable views on these problems, particularly that of the future of the Sharia. For instance, the SPLA and the DUP had signed a draft peace agreement in Addis Ababa in November 1988, but Mahdi refused to endorse it, thereby prompting the DUP to withdraw from the government in December 1988.

Early in 1989, the Sudanese army, which had been frustrated by a lack of equipment and by the military victories achieved by the SPLA, tried to put pressure on the Prime Minister to re-examine the role of Islamic law and to end the civil war. It sent Mahdi a memorandum on 20 February 1989 demanding, within one week, an end to the government's pro-Libyan policy, the formation of a broad-based government, the reduction of Islamic fundamentalist influence in the government and initiatives to end the civil war. Mahdi, as usual, hesitated, but after meeting with Armed Forces Commander-in-Chief, General Fathi Ahmed Ali, on 2 March 1989, he accepted the general thrust of the memorandum. As a result, the NIF, by far the best organized political grouping in the country, left his government, and Mahdi now had to form another coalition government with the DUP and the minor southern parties. This vacillation on Mahdi's part made any positive action by the government impossible. Not only was his government unable to operate with any efficiency, he appeared to be seeking compromise with other political parties as an end in itself, rather than as a means to some larger end.

Beshir and his ruling Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) for National Salvation claimed in 1989 that one of their main reasons for intervening in politics was to work out an acceptable formula for ending the civil war. Beshir's peace plan, announced in late 1989, envisaged a federal arrangement in which any unit would be free to opt out of Islamic law. The main thrust of Beshir's proposal was that Sudan could be partitioned, but the Sharia would not be abolished. If implemented, the scheme would
effectively mean that Khartoum and the rest of the more developed northern Sudan would be governed by the Sharia and any non-Muslim southerner who worked there would be subject to these laws. This was unacceptable to the SPLA, which reiterated its demand for the abolition of the Sharia, the formation of an interim government, the lifting of bans on political organizations and the reconstitution of the Sudanese army to include SPLA troops.

Conclusions

The Horn's complex and precarious political situation, mounting economic difficulties and long-running civil wars, which stem from local sources, have been exacerbated by the decline of the Superpower presence and the general indifference of the Western world. While it is true that solutions to the problems in the Horn or elsewhere in Africa have to come from within, given the circumstances outlined above, the local parties need external support, and the reduction of the Superpower presence in the region has raised questions about future brokers in these countries' internal and regional conflicts. The US showed some interest in Ethiopia just before the fall of the Mengistu government, but whether it will go ahead and help the new government establish a stable regime remains to be seen. Due to what is inappropriately called donor fatigue, but which might mean something more sinister, other Western powers appear to have no interest in the desperate economic plight of Ethiopia or its neighbours. The likely problem if the US alone were involved is that its visibility would make the new Ethiopian government look like Washington's puppet - an image that would essentially undermine the new regime's legitimacy and possibly cause local disaffection with it.

Western critics and governments have urged African leaders in the past few years to liberalize their political systems and, in particular, establish multi-party systems as a demonstration of their commitment to democracy. There is no doubt about the efficacy of a multi-party system in a society that understands and accepts the Western notion of democracy. What is in question is the obsession with form which can be quite misleading unless content is also given equal weight. But how far can the international community go in ensuring that content matches form without seriously undermining the sovereignty of the countries in question? Moreover, the Ethiopian and Somali leaders, who are expected to carry out these democratic reforms, have never experienced democracy in their lives. Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia and Ali Mohammed in Somalia will find it convenient to mime the language of democracy which is expected of them by their Western sponsors and prospective donors, but there is little evidence that they fully understand the meaning and have the ability to translate these words into action. The likely outcome of the so-called
democratic measures which African leaders are undertaking might be the creation of some political structures that give the appearance of democracy, but the reality might be something else.

In the meantime, the security situation in Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan shows no sign of settling down. The new government in Ethiopia is yet to take shape, but it is already at war with an internal opposition which appears to be comprised of some of the remnants of Mengistu's forces. As an umbrella organization, the EPRDF was effective in opposition, but it is still too early to say whether its various components, especially the TPLF, the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement, the Oromo Liberation Front and the Free Soldiers Movement, will continue to cooperate now that they are in government. One issue that is likely to divide the EPRDF is the future of Eritrea. The EPLF, which had fought for Eritrea's independence for more than two decades, has declared a separate administration for the territory. The independence of Eritrea will create enormous political problems for the Zenawi government in Addis Ababa. Indeed, as it looks now, the Zenawi regime will merely hang onto power, but unless Ethiopia remains intact, it will neither govern much of the country nor be able to provide much of a life for those under its control.

The situation in Somalia points to continued disintegration, with the SNM firmly in control of northern Somalia, the USC in Mogadishu and the surrounding region, while the SPM occupies the southern tip of the country. An Italian diplomat said in 1990 that Somalia could not live with Barre, but it also could not live without him; those words now carry more meaning than they did when they were uttered. The problems in Somalia defy any clear-cut description, but without a strong leader in the form of an enlightened Leviathan, the country will continue on its fast trajectory towards anarchy. The Sudanese government, whose forces are still engaged in war with SPLA guerrillas, is clearly in a weakened state. Although neither side appears to be able to overcome the other, the course of the talks they have held in the past have indicated that there is little basis for a renewal of negotiations between them. Beshir's power base appears to be very fragile; since he increasingly relies on Islamic fundamentalists for support, there seems little possibility of replacing Islamic law. With the Sudanese economy still in a shambles and under these conditions little reason to expect further foreign investment, the possibility of meaningful recovery is remote. At best, the government and the country seem condemned to merely stumble along.
Endnotes

1. For useful analyses of the role of the Superpowers in the Horn during the Cold War, see, for instance, Samuel M. Makinda, *Superpower Diplomacy in the Horn of Africa* (London, Croom Helm, 1987) and Marina Ottaway, *Soviet and American Influence in the Horn of Africa* (New York, Praeger, 1982).


