



Meeting Summary

No redress: Somalia's forgotten minorities

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Mark Lattimer:

Good afternoon.

My name is Mark Lattimer and I am the Minority Rights Groups' Executive Director. By way of an introduction to this report, I feel a bit of context for why we undertook the research project would help proceedings. In short, Somalia's minorities have been comprehensively forgotten both domestically and on a wider international stage. Indeed, all Somalis have been forgotten. NGOs have failed Somalia, and the international community retains the cynical perception that the country is little more than a 'security issue'. These same international organisations have failed in addressing the wider and pressing issues facing this complex issue.

Somalia itself is dominated by four 'majority' clans that are often referred to as 'nobles'. These are the Hawiye, Darod, Dir and Rahanweyn. These family clans tend to control Somalia's politics and economics since independence. The majorities' over-arching powers cast a long shadow over the rights of the minorities. Somalia has always had a very diverse population of minorities. The three largest groups of minorities are the Bantu, Benadiri and Occupational Groups. The Bantu are farmers and were traditionally subjugated by the Arab slave-trade – they are often the victims of land grabs. The Benadiri live on the coast and are mercantile people. They were migrants from all over the Gulf and used to have a sizeable population in Somalia (at one time, they comprised of half the population of Mogadishu). Finally, the Occupational Groups (or caste groups as they're sometimes known) represent the lowest rung in the socio-economic strata. They especially suffer from a lack of official protection.

Over the last twenty years, Somali has witnessed significant shifts in clan alliances. However, one thing remains consistent: the marginalisation of the minority groups. There remain little forms of official redress for minorities. However, the potential for radical change in their standing within Somali society have recently become evident. Estimates of up to a third of the Somali population belong to a minority group. As such, any process of democratisation could lead to minority groups having a significant impact on the government.

Marusca Perazzi:

The research mission was conducted in mid-2009, and the questions were grounded in the relevant academic materials at our disposal. The decision

was made to pursue a qualitative approach towards the research mission and the questions were agreed by the MRG team and collected by Martin Hill. The research mission was taken by two experienced Somalis (one man, one woman) with extensive experience of NGO work and the findings of the mission itself has led to the bulk of the report. We launched the report in Nairobi and feel that it represents a great opportunity for people to discuss minority issues.

Martin Hall:

If you'd like to understand the extent to which Somali minorities are marginalised on an international level, you need look no further than the latest International Crisis Group's latest Somali report, in which the plight of minorities has been wholly omitted. This should come as little surprise to many in the field. After all, the false myth of demographic homogeneity within Somali society is prevalent. It is the purpose of this report to challenge this misconception about the people that make up Somalia. It is not a pastoralist society, but a plural and heterogeneous one. It might be dominated by pastoralist clans, but this is neither here nor there. The minority groups within Somalia are an invisible, forgotten people and lack basic access to redress and justice. There is a traditional Somali saying that indicates the historical practice of prejudice within this troubled country: 'No one will weep for me'. Despite this backdrop of discrimination, there remains a few opportunities for real positive change.

As already addressed, our methodology throughout the project was adopting a qualitative approach towards collecting data. Our male and female research team collected some vivid testimonies. We wanted to ensure that our project was not purely based on figures. Ideally, this project would represent a turning point in the normative sense: it was supposed to encourage minority groups to research their own heritage and, as such, compelling them to undertake a greater level of activism.

The marginalised minorities come from varied backgrounds and have retained their social differences. It is estimated that up to 3 million Somalis fall in to the minorities demographic. Despite their retention of their traditional cultures, there is a large body of evidence to suggest that integration with local clans has been fairly prevalent. Fraternisation with the 'nobility' is still frowned upon though and, in some cases, it's illegal.

To develop on the different minority groups as outlined before, a greater in-depth analysis of these groups is required:

- Bantu were traditionally from slave communities have maintained many of their socio-cultural institutions and languages despite attempts to repress its peoples. After opportunities afforded unto them with the economic upturn after the 1969 coup, Bantu were granted greater access to state schooling and employment, and they keenly pursued jobs in agricultural development and trade. Despite these developments, the Bantu still suffer at the hands of warlords' armed militias and agrarian subsistence.
- The Benadiri built Mogadishu and were instrumental in spreading Islam across Somalia. They traded abroad as well as inland with the pastoralists. They are chiefly based on the Benadir coastlines of Somalia. Benadiri are proud of their cultural heritage and regularly practice Sufi studies and speak in their Swahili dialect. In the early 1990s, warlords' forces pillaged Benadiri lands and used rape prolifically as a weapon of war – the results of which was a massacre. Food aid from international organisations was diverted and large proportions of their population have fled to neighbouring countries.
- Occupational Groups could be compared with the untouchables of India – although the use of the term 'caste' is only partly useful in describing their heterogeneous nature. They are primarily craftspeople and artists and can be split in to three main groups: the Midgan (aka Gaboye), the Tumul and the Yibro. The Midgan were traditionally hunters and leatherworkers but have also undertaken crafts: use of the term Gaboye in Somaliland is generally considered offensive. The Tumul are chiefly ironworkers and blacksmiths by trade and the Yibro make their living mainly through soothsaying and astrology.
- Ashraf and Shekhal are two religious Islamic minority groups that often provide warring parties with forums in which to discuss matters peacefully. They are seen as major regional players in conflict resolution. They also suffer at the hands of the pastoralists due to their lack of an armed militia to support them.

- Christians represent a small amount of Somali society and can be found in pockets all over the country. They face persecution in the south of the country especially by Al Shabaab and other groups advocating Sharia Law.
- Hunter-gatherers were outlawed under the Siyaad Barre regime although a minority of them were let in to the civil service and armed forces.

It should be emphasised that the three regions within Somalia (Somaliland, Puntland and South Central Somalia) treat their minorities in different ways. Somaliland has provided the most rapidly progressive region in advancing minorities' rights but educational discrimination and objections to inter-marriage are still major barriers facing these causes. Minorities in Puntland are regularly internally displaced by pastoralist communities, lack effective avenues for justice and minority women in particular are subjected to gender-based violence. The situation for minorities in South Central Somalia is the most fraught, with the ongoing conflict causing wide-ranging human rights abuses across the region.

Recommendations

The recommendations are outlined in the report (and can be found on page 27) and address the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), the regional governments of Puntland and Somaliland (and all of them combined), the armed forces, the countries of asylum and international agencies.

We believe that change can come from within and that greater activism of the minority groups (alongside support from some majority groups) can lead to a real progressive process of establishing human rights for all Somalis.

Q&A SESSION:

Q: How would you assess the role of the West (particularly the UK and the US) in promoting human rights in Somalia? Is the unique geo-political nature of Somalia part of its failure to pursue an effective human rights campaign? Would a human rights campaign be a priority?

Martin Hall: Very much so – it is a high priority. Currently the UN fears that Somalia could become a collapsed state. Al Shabaab controls South Central Somalia and the Arab League are trying their best prevent the situation getting worse. The UN's attempts to reach out to the Somali people through the TFG have failed as the TFG lack any legitimate power. Due to the more positive results emanating from Somaliland, the UN is trying there for a potential base of operations. With regards to minorities, very little is done to address human rights challenges being perpetrated in Somalia. There have been some DFID grants and Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have had some input to the process, but it is scant on the ground.

Q: Are there any concrete moves from the West? Would Western military intervention be on the table in Somalia?

Martin Hall: Not sure about the military intervention angle – lack the qualifications to answer.

Q: Do you see any external interventions that could be used to target specific minorities' issues? Is there enough of a distinction between the policies aimed at majorities, and those aimed at minorities?

Martin Hall: The Somali population is too mixed and diverse to create specific policies – perhaps a universal approach? The US is already militarily active in South Central Somalia. Politically, the US and UK channel their concerns through the UN process. As of late, there has been an interesting change in Western policy. They've begun to ask whether a unified Somalia is viable. After all, the TFG have no land or support. It would appear that there is a greater appetite in the West for the devolution of Somaliland as the best solution: this could very well be the future of Somalia. The UNHCR are keeping the Somali people alive with basic goods – this standard needs to be maintained.

Q: What impact have regional players had on the process?

Martin Hall: The African Union has provided AMISOM, although they themselves have been found guilty of human rights abuses – this has greatly damaged the reputation of their mission. AMISOM's support of the TFG has led to their death by association. They, as well as the Arab league, have proved ineffectual at preventing human rights abuses.

Q: Would there be a preference for political regime? Shabaab or TFG?

Martin Hall: As the TFG lack a sufficient presence or mandate, they can't truly be factored in to the equation. Al Shabaab rule in the south and have started to allow human rights agencies to operate in the region, albeit under strict Shabaab supervision.

Q: If the international community were to step back from Somaliland, how high up the agenda would human rights be?

Martin Hall: This issue can and should be taken up outside of the UN. Greater dialogue with conditionality is the future of this process.

Q: How successful has the UNDP operation been?

Martin Hall: The UNDP has supported the TFG through the constitution process. The UNDP takes advantage of NGOs in Somalia to make the constitutional consultation wider and to raise awareness of the issue: their efforts have been aided by the publishing of the preliminary constitution online. Although the consultation project has just begun it has still suffered setbacks in the guise of pressure groups shouting louder than others. Hopefully, the initiative will give an opportunity for marginalised groups to have their say. As of yet, the draft federal constitution lacks policies directly relating to the human rights of minorities – a proposal for such policies can be found in the report's recommendations. All in all, there has been real progress from the 2000 charter and, arguably, the embryonic stages of opposition political parties are beginning to take shape.

Q: With regards to international intervention to address inequalities in the current Somali status quo: is there anything to be said for the argument that there is a cultural basis for this discrimination and, as such, can Western intervention have any indelible change on these habits and norms?

Martin Hall: There are already signs of activism from within Somalia that indicate that non-state actors are becoming more proactive in their approach

towards transforming the political landscape. Greater integration in some regions between minorities and majorities and inter-marrying are becoming regular fixtures. What is seriously lacking is the institutional representation of minorities – the respective governments need to catch up with the indigenous NGOs.

Q: Just to clarify, are the minorities involved in any small way with piracy? If so, could this activity stand the minorities in bad stead when demanding equal rights?

Martin Hall: Pirates are not involved in piracy as a rule. However, the government could do a lot more to dispel this myth that minority groups are pirates.

Q: Have you seen a collective comprehensive approach from the international community or Somalis to address the issue?

Martin Hall: No. I must stress that despite the role of many international organisations (World Service, Lewisham's Somali Diaspora) it has been an awfully long time since Somalia saw anything like a real government. The UN's humanitarian action did go ahead despite the organisation's reticence at the lack of a stable government. The only approach in the foreseeable future will be multifaceted and incremental.

Mark Lattimer: To round things off, I think an important question to address is: would a comprehensive solution be necessary? What has become evident is that the change would need to be of an incremental nature: that is the true necessity. The 4.5 formula towards minorities has been discredited but it does provide us with a start towards the democratisation process.¹

¹ The "4.5 formula" gives half a seat to all minorities combined when each of Somalia's four main clans get one.