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# SOMALIA

## 'The Struggle Continues'

By Adulkadir N. Said

*The writer is the editor of New Directions. He recently visited the Somali Democratic Republic to inspect first-hand the country's progress since the October 21, 1969 Revolution.*

The big jet with the Somali flag on its tail made a smooth take-off from Nairobi and headed east toward Mogadiscio. Flight time: 90 minutes. The feeling of already being in Somalia engulfed me over the city of Nairobi as I heard the welcoming words of a hostess in the mother tongue. There was no doubt in my mind that I would be conversing in Somali most of the time during my week's stay. And the knowledge that my competency of the language has not diminished—in view of my long separation—generated a feeling of renewed confidence. The day before, I did well conversing in Swahili aboard the East African Airways flight from Frankfurt to Nairobi. Ten years of using mostly English has not taken away any of my African heritage. It only enriched my perspective.

Suddenly, the plane was circling over the coastal city of Mogadiscio to await clearance for landing. Those few minutes over the city gave me an aerial perspective of how vast the city has become since my last visit five years ago.

Walking from the plane to the main terminal, I noticed the building had been enlarged and a second floor added—a sign of progress. Several hundred school

ently organized to welcome a victorious soccer team that was returning from Uganda. The children waved miniature flags and chanted welcome in Somali. They were cheerful, disciplined. Another sign of progress.

The short drive from the airport to the hotel was by a VW bus. I noticed the airport road had been widened and improved. Along the way, I also observed several connecting new arteries. More signs of progress. I found myself breathless when the VW bus came to a halt at the main entrance of a new multi-story hotel. A winding structure, bright in color, the hotel projected grace and splendor of the East. Its hand-carved large wooden doors and long windows were aesthetically pleasing.

I was ushered into a spacious room with twin beds, telephone, wall-to-wall carpet, private bath, private balcony and wall air conditioning unit.

Curiously, I looked out of the sliding glass door of the balcony and noticed a huge structure across the street. It resembled a hotel under construction. But I dismissed the idea, because I saw no common sense in erecting two hotels facing each other in the center of the city. I was later told the other building will house a bank in a few months.

### I: The Shaping of a Positive Image

Malcolm X said it a long time ago:

*"I believe in anything that is necessary to correct unjust conditions. I believe in it as long as it's intelligently directed and designed to get results."*

The words of Malcolm provide an appropriate gauge when analysing the revolution in Somalia and the resulting shift to Scientific Socialism. Why Scientific Socialism for Somalia?

The answer to the question comes from the President of Somalia, Major-General Mohammed Siyad:

*"We have chosen Scientific Socialism because it is the only way for the rapid transformation of the country into a developed and economically advanced nation."*

General Siyad spoke those words during the early stage of Somalia's 180-degree turn from foreign exploitation and dependency toward self-sufficiency through hard work. That was seven years ago. The enthusiasm which prevailed then has not diminished. And Somalia continues to move forward step by step toward the elusive—but possible—goals of economic stability and self-sufficiency.

The Somali revolution was conceived during the mid-1960s when corruption, tribalism, nepotism and cronyism on the part of politicians and civil servants to whom the colonialists handed power in 1960 got out of control. Those were the days when votes in the National Assembly were bartered without regard to national interest. A multi-party system thrived under the direction of influence-peddling opportunists.

Indeed, the obsession to amass wealth on the part of individuals who found themselves ideally selected for high positions in government was the talk of the country.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ABDULKADIR N. SAID

(The fault was not with becoming wealthy; it was with the method.) Civil Service jobs were distributed not according to ability but by virtue of being well-connected to the power base. So were scholarships to universities in the West—particularly Italy, England and the United States—and recommendations for positions with international agencies of the United Nations. This unhealthy situation made it possible for a handful of individuals to benefit handsomely from the fruits of independence for which all Somalis had fought, many with their blood.

The prevailing atmosphere at the time, pre-1969, gave way to exploitation by certain foreign powers whose main interest was to maintain the status quo through neocolonialism, with the acquiescence of suddenly-rich leaders. The revolution came unannounced—perhaps as this group of opportunists was comparing notes on who has imported the latest Mercedes-Benz, or built the largest villa (for rent to U. S. aid personnel/diplomats and other Europeans at exorbitant rates).

The coming of the revolution, therefore, was inevitable. To the street people, it came as an anti-climax when it happened during the pre-dawn hours of October 21, 1969.

Four years before, I had moved to the United States to continue my journalistic career. No regret. I was elated when the news of the coup came over the United Press International wire service at the editorial office of the Baltimore newspaper where I was employed as a writer. My <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol4/iss2/3>

initial reaction was not one of surprise, but of hope. For I saw an end to the conditions which figured in my decision to move to America—nepotism, tribalism and corruption in high places. For me, America was the logical choice, not withstanding the racism which is woven into its social fabric.

Days later, at a Washington reception, I was not perturbed when an American acquaintance remarked: "Too bad, we've lost Somalia." The reaction at the State Department may have been the same, I thought. It was obvious that Somalia was no longer a place within the Western sphere of influence.

The current President of Somalia, General Siyad, surfaced as the leader of a group known as the SRC—Supreme Revolutionary Council. At the outset, there was nothing to suggest that the country's new rulers would fare better, particularly when the conduct of other military rulers in other parts of the Continent is taken into consideration.

The initial skepticism translated into optimism after the collective leadership made known their plan to transform the country from a dependent nation to a self-sufficient state, through hard work and a positive national self-image. Thereafter followed a massive campaign to re-educate the country's bureaucrats and to reshape the minds of the masses through the media, the classroom and public gatherings. Those staunch colonial hangers-on who proved beyond rehabilitation were merely relieved of their duties. The

reshaping of a new order began. (The bureaucracy may not be well yet in all sectors. This assessment is from a recent personal experience at the municipal center which left a sour note—it took two daily trips and long waits to get immunization from cholera.)

As is the case with all revolutions, there was some resistance at the beginning. Indeed, few politicians, wealthy businessmen and civil servants did depart through the back door to neighboring African states and Europe. This mini exodus may have stemmed from fear of detention—in view of the arrest of several members of the National Assembly, the Prime Minister and members of his cabinet immediately after the takeover.

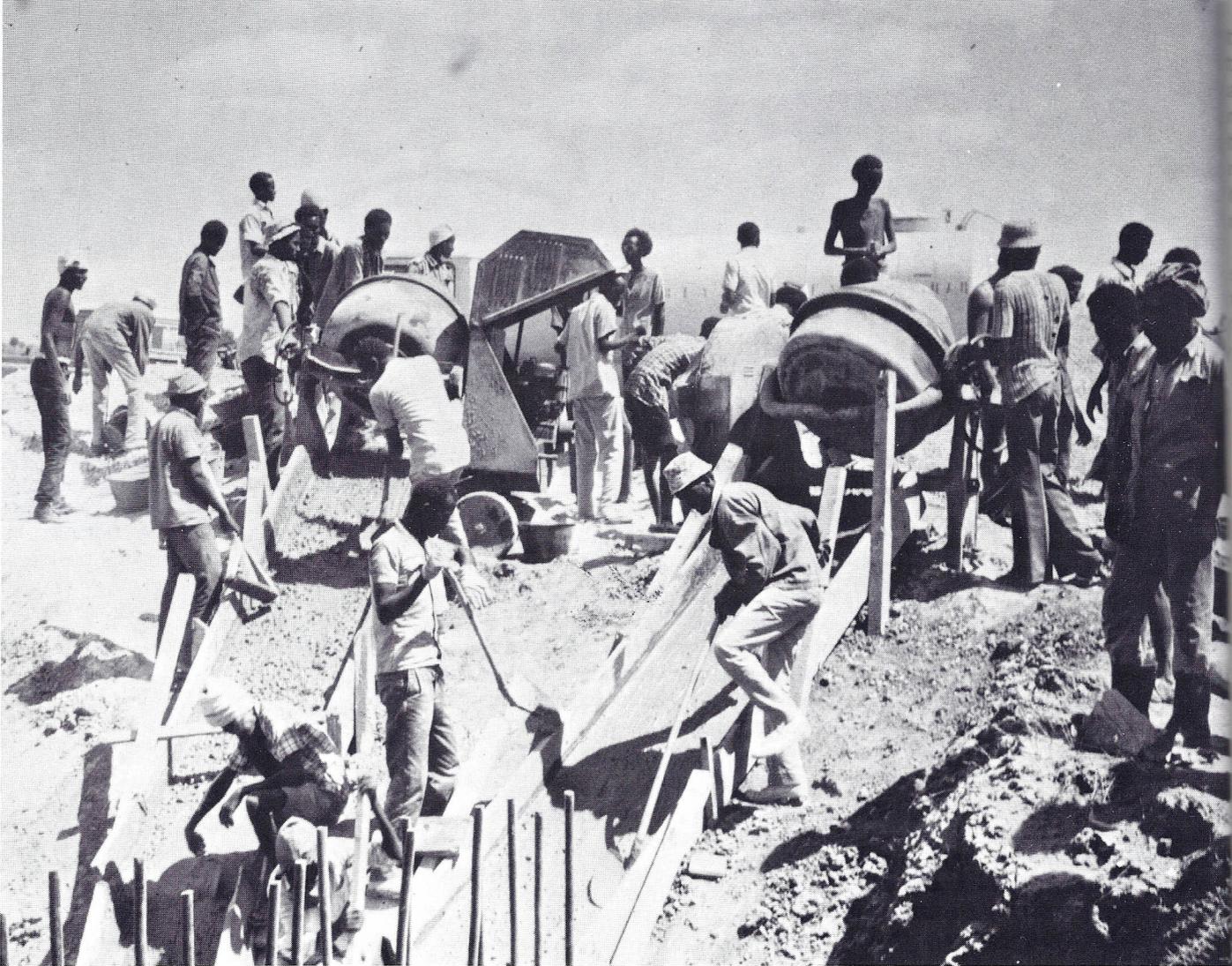
At any rate, most of those detained in 1969 have been let go, the last few in the past two years. Some are now serving as ambassadors to the United Nations, Iran, India, and as civil servants at home.

About a dozen men have been executed since 1969, including a high ranking member of the SRC who was charged with planning a counter-coup that never materialized, and a handful of conservative religious elders who committed acts of treason by preaching evil against Socialism and women's rights. All things considered, there was *no* bloodshed in Somalia. But the fear of detention (for security reasons) still persists.

## II: The Changing Society

The foremost question on the minds of all skeptics is this: How well Somalia has fared as a Socialist state?

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Prior to 1969 Somalia was a divided nation within its social structure. This condition was born out of lingering tribalism and sectionalism. It provided comfort for neo-colonialists and company and helped them stage a drama of perpetual dominance. Indeed, Somalia belonged to a handful of people, at the expense of the masses.

Today, another kind of drama is being staged, this time with the participation of the masses. In all fairness and without attempting to compare the situation there with that of any other country, Somalia stands to gain in the long run so long as it continues to place the people's interest ahead of that of privileged individuals.

During my brief stay, I was impressed by most of what I was able to observe: large agricultural projects, water conservation projects, textile, sugar, and spaghetti factories, fisheries projects, new schools, roads, and so forth.

In a short period of seven years, Somalia has undergone a remarkable transformation that would capture the imagination of most observers with an eye for objectivity.

Externally, particularly within the African Continent and at international circles, Somalia is enjoying a dignified stature due to its progressive stance on issues of global importance.

Internally, there is a feeling of guarded optimism coupled with the knowledge that the onus of moving Somalia ahead is on the Somali people. Ideally, without reverting to isolationism. There is a sense of renewed pride and nationalism.

One of the high accomplishments of the revolution, an accomplishment at which most outside observers continue to marvel, is the writing of the Somali language. This was done in a brief period of less than three years, after the initial approval of the new script of modified Latin characters.

To teach the masses the new script, the government launched two literary campaigns, the first from October 1972 through January 1973. The second cam-

paigned extended from July 1974 through February 1975. And written Somali was inaugurated as the official working language in Somalia in January 1973, replacing English and Italian. The first newspaper in Somali language was published on January 21, 1973.

Before the language was written, approximately 99 percent of Somalia's estimated 5 million people were illiterate. After the successful literary campaigns, more than half of the people (55 percent) were able to read and write, according to figures compiled by the Ministry of Information and National Guidance.

Therefore, it was fitting when an international jury convened by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) awarded to Somalia the Nadezhda Krupskaya Literary Prize.

The masses' hunger for education is being met throughout the country to the extent that resources will allow. For example, since the revolution, the number of primary schools has grown from 231 in 1969 to 844 in 1976. On the secondary level, the growth is from 26 in 1969 to 49 in 1976. The student population has increased from 55,023 students to 226,563. And the teaching staff has grown from 1,873 teachers in 1969 to 6,824 in 1976.

A national institution of higher learning has been founded since the revolution. Somalia's present crop of college students are in training in these nine faculties of the Somali National University: Agriculture, Chemistry, Economics, Education, Engineering, Law, Veterinary, Medicine and Geology. The 1976 national budget for the university is approximately \$2.5 million. More educational projects, on all levels, are in planning at an initial expenditure of approximately \$10.5 million.

Other important changes since the revolution include: the nationalizing of all major factories, large businesses and banks. Also, the successful agricultural crash programs that were inaugurated throughout the farming sectors of the country.

General Siyad had this to say concerning the nationalization program:

*"Our country, because of colonialism first and the reactionary cliques later, preserved an extremely backward economic structure. The only living sector of our economy was external trade. But because of the constant deterioration of the terms of exchange, it is also aggravating our condition. Besides, this sector is almost totally under foreigners. And, it is not possible, in any manner, to reconcile their interests with those of the nation. No foreigner had ever re-invested profits obtained in trading in other productive sectors.*

*They took advantage of the law on investments to send the profits to their countries of origin. This law, which was originally launched to draw foreign investments in a fruitful manner for us and for them, was transformed into an instrument of contraband."*

The nationalization of the economy has yet to bring riches to Somalia. But in view of the exploitation that was inherent in the old system, the new system is bound to enhance the quest for a strong economy. Time is a major factor here. The current world-wide inflationary trend is another factor. This is reflected in the high prices of basic commodities such as rice, flour and pasta. Still another factor which has contributed to slow growth is the long drought which hit the country during 1973 and 1974.

### III: The Drought

Approximately one-fifth of Somalia's population was directly affected by the drought. Thousands of lives perished; hundreds of communities destroyed or disorganized; the national economy unbalanced; masses of humanity displaced.

First on the agenda was the problem of human resettlement, which required the provision of shelter, food, clothing, medicine and basic necessities. The damage was extensive. But, it was handled well with the helping hand of the world community.



Approximately one million people were affected by the drought, of which about 250,000 required complete resettlement and occupational training. These victims represented—for the most part—nomadic families who lost everything to the drought and who became uprooted from their traditional habitat. The livestock on which they depended perished, thereby curtailing Somalia's export trade. Ironically, the drought did enhance the government's plan to resettle nomadic families into sedentary communities. And this was done successfully by retraining them as fishermen and as farmers in new self-containing communities in several sectors of the country.

Last May, in an article which appeared in a monthly journal called *New Era*, the Secretary of Agriculture and Fishing gave his evaluation of the rehabilitation projects as follows:

*"We are happy with the level of development the various settlements have reached. In the field of education, for example, teachers, schools and training facilities have been provided to all of the children under the age of 14. Also, work in agriculture and fishing have been provided for adults over the age of*

*14. The people in the settlements themselves have already mastered various tasks...."*

The drought in Somalia was the culmination of numerous factors, the major one being lack of rain for unusually long periods. Generally, it is viewed as an extension of the more severe one which caused massive destruction in the Sahel and in parts of the neighboring country of Ethiopia.

#### **IV: The Vanguard Party**

Now that Somalia has successfully made the turn to a new path of political, ideological, social, and economic development, the Supreme Revolutionary Council has transferred power to a newly-found organization, the Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party.

The party, which is tailor-made to enhance the struggle for "progress and prosperity," was inaugurated on July 1, 1976, following a public announcement of its formation by General Siyad at a mass rally on June 27, 1976. Present at that rally were people from all segments of the Somali society, including members of the armed forces, workers, small businessmen, students, nomads and intellectuals.

General Siyad, who is popularly known as father of the revolution, told those assembled:

*"In pursuance of the pledges and obligations laid down in the first charter, the SRC had created political conditions, awakening and seasoning the Somali society for the formation of a party when time was ripe for it. During the six years and nine months of the revolution's existence, the political office of the President has been engaged in the creation of a patriotic, progressive and socialistic organization comprising the youth, workers, women, peasants and the armed forces. In order to raise the political consciousness of the people, a variety of training courses have been conducted both at home and abroad. Centers for uplifting public political knowledge and awareness have also been established. After ascertaining that the Somali society was politically ripe for the formation of a party to lead them, the SRC met on June 8, 1976, and resolved that a political party to usher the way to progress and prosperity be founded."*

At that gathering, General Siyad was unanimously elected secretary general of



the party. Also, 5 political committee members and 74 central committee members were named. Thereafter, the Supreme Revolutionary Council handed the power to govern the country to the newly-formed people's party on July 1, 1976—opening a new chapter for Somalia on the 16th anniversary of its 1960 independence.

The first paragraph in the introduction to the party constitution sets forth the party mandate as follows:

*"The Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party is a political party whose aims and objectives are to lead the Somali people to prosperity and new socio-economic development based on equality, social justice and the total abolition of exploitation of man by man."*

All Somali citizens age 18 and above are eligible for party membership.

The mood of Somalia today is summed up in the following paragraphs from a public message by General Siyad on the occasion of the seventh anniversary of the revolution:

*"This anniversary has special significance because it coincides at a time when important changes are taking place in our country, the African Conti-*

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*ment, and the world at large. Such changes are reflected in the increasing victory of the liberation movements under the forces of progress over imperialism. In our country itself significant steps have been taken toward economic progress, and the development of the political consciousness of our people. . . . Many people thought that it is an impossible thing for a military regime which has established its power to transfer it again. But such people forget that in our case the armed forces took over power with the support of the people, that no private interest for the initiators was involved, that it was no mere coup d'etat. As manifested in the first and second declarations, this takeover was no mere emotional outpouring, it was a well-planned uprising based on sound principles serving the interests of the Somali masses."*

Someone reportedly had said, Somalia is the China of Africa. If this analogy is correct, perhaps 20 years hence the significance of the events now taking shape in Somalia will become clearer to the skeptics of today.

It would be appropriate, therefore, to conclude this analysis of Somalia with

the words of Joshua Nkomo, leader of the African National Council of Zimbabwe, who was in Somalia with a few of his colleagues to partake in the anniversary celebration:

*"During our stay, we witnessed a united nation ready to tackle any obstacle in the progress of the country, and I would say that it is an example for other progressive Africans to follow."*

Indeed, in Somalia today, the struggle continues. □