

Rise of Islamic Forces in Somalia

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Somalia has entered into a new period of crises with the rise of Islamic forces in the country. After months of fierce fighting, on June 4 this year the militias under the Islamic Court Union (ICU) wrested control of Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, from the secular warlords, who were reported to have had the backing of the United States. The warlords and businessmen, united under the Alliance for Restoration of Peace and Counter Terrorism (ARPCT), have been routed out of the capital, which they had dominated since the collapse of the state in 1991. The Islamic militias have not only asserted their authority but have extended their control to most of the country's southern region. It appears as if the country is heading towards rule by an extremist Muslim leadership.

Somalia as a Terror Threat

Since the September 11, 2001 events, Somalia has been under the US radar for being an ungoverned country with the potential of becoming a breeding ground for the Al Qaida terrorists. US officials have long feared that it would become an ideal base for Al Qaida to hide and plan attacks, given the anarchic state and the patchwork of competing warlords, and the absence of an effective central authority, police forces and visa system. Even prior to 9/11, terrorist attacks have emanated from the Somali soil. Al Qaida operatives used Somalia as a rear base to blow up the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam in 1998, to attempt to shoot down a British Airways jet at Nairobi's international airport, and to carry out the October 2002 suicide attack on an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombassa.

Washington's involvement in Somalia is predicated on a desire to undermine the terrorist threat. A task force of the US-led coalition has been active in the Horn of Africa, and has set up a military base at Camp Lemonier in Djibouti for counter-terrorism operations. In pursuance of its counter-terrorism strategy, the US has reportedly funded the warlords to

monitor and “snatch” suspected terrorists in Somalia. According to John Prendergast, a senior adviser with the non-governmental International Crisis Group, “the US relies on buying intelligence from warlords and other participants in the Somali conflict, and hoping that the strongest of the warlords can snatch a live suspect or two if the intelligence identifies their whereabouts.”

In the new context, the US fears that the increased Islamic hold over the country will allow it to become a safe haven for Al Qaida militants and other religious fighters who ascribe to the Al Qaida ideology aimed at the US and its allies. In fact, there is a growing fear that the country will begin to resemble the former terrorist haven of Afghanistan.

Talibanisation or Stabilisation

The Islamist leader Sharif Sheikh Ahmed has said that they have no intention to impose a Taliban-style Islamic state; although they have not hidden their preferred style of governance. The country will be governed by Sharia law should they triumph. He has also denied harbouring any foreign terrorists, which the US is most concerned about and which the warlords have been accusing him of doing. But at the same time, he has vehemently opposed any US intervention in Mogadishu and has threatened that there would be serious repercussions if it does so, perhaps a repeat of the attacks that routed the US forces in 1993. He has justified the violent clashes against the warlords as the way of the insurgents to defend the people from the destructive actions of the warlords.

As far as the Somali people are concerned, they have shown characteristic restraint so far. The people are ideologically moderate and patient, and are unlikely to give any licence to Islamic extremism. But after suffering for a decade and half under the warlords perhaps they may prefer an Islamic state, in the hope that it would bring some order in the chaos.

Unlike the transitional Federal government, the Islamic courts have already garnered popular support for taking up the responsibility of providing social amenities such as hospitals and schools. In the absence of a state, they appear to be the only authority wielding power, and willing to alleviate the problems of the people and are the only ones seen to be making a difference. The Islamic Courts Union (ICU) thus could gain power because

it offers a more attractive alternative to the warlords. Through its approach it has also been able to propagate its beliefs.

On its part, the ICU is not a compact centralised organisation but an umbrella group of local bodies divided between moderate Islamists who control eleven groups and the radicals with two. Also, their dominant theme has been nationalism and not Islamism, which is manifested in their demonstrations against deployment of foreign peacekeepers in Somalia and for which they have the people's support. By projecting a nationalist stand, the ICU has the potential of becoming a force that transcends clan loyalties, provided it continues to moderate its Islamic agenda. However, there are divisions, which have surfaced recently, over whether it should form a Transitional Federal Government (TFG), a national unity government or a separate government based on Islamic law. The ICU has gained a decisive advantage but it is as yet not clear whether it will be able to secure lasting order. It certainly has the upper hand in the domestic power configuration, but not much support in the regional and international context. It also mistrusts Somalia's neighbours. It is, however, already a formidable force that has the potential for ushering in both Talibanisation and stabilisation.

Regional and International Response

As far as regional and international responses are concerned, efforts are geared towards restoring peace and stability in Somalia. How far these will be successful remains to be seen. The Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (AU) has underlined the urgent need for deployment of a regional peacekeeping force in Somalia and has also stressed the need for supporting the transitional federal institutions in the country to fully assume their responsibilities. The UN for its part also supports and endorses the decision taken by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)¹ on June 13 to send peacekeeping troops to Somalia. The African states, especially the neighbouring states, are in favour of peacekeepers in Somalia, for the obvious reason that any kind of Islamic dictatorship in the neighbourhood will be detrimental to their interest. IGAD, in fact, has approved a peacekeeping mission on the condition that the UN partially relaxes the arms embargo. It is urging a dialogue between the ICU and the TFG. The TFG supports a peacekeeping mission for restoring order and stability.

But the ICU has fervently opposed any kind of foreign troop deployment. It mistrusts its neighbours. It does not believe that a Sudanese or Ugandan peacekeeping force will check Ethiopian influence, which is a principal concern, given Ethiopia's past military record of destroying al-Ittihad bases in Somalia in the 1990s and its current deployment of troops along the border with Somalia. Even the Somali people, who repose so much of faith in the ICU, hardly have any faith in foreign troops. This mistrust stems from their bitter experiences. They appear to favour the kind of stability the radical Islamist forces are attempting to bring to Somalia. That, however, is unacceptable to the regional and international bodies. Also, it is too premature to conceive the ICU as a force wielding enough power to restore stability.

As part of its response to the evolving situation, Washington has formed a "contact group" consisting of its allies, Britain and Italy, and other mediators like Norway, Sweden, and the European Union along with Tanzania — the only East African State outside the IGAD. The group considers the TFG a "legitimate and viable framework" for stabilisation and has called for a dialogue between the ICU and TFG. However, they have not said anything regarding peacekeeping mission and exemptions to the UN arms embargo. For the meantime, though not very robust the contact group appears to be suitable as a stopgap measure. It is the best that Washington can offer at present; given the unpopularity it has earned among the wider Somali public.

US Role under Criticism

The US is mistrusted because of its 1993 debacle and its self-proclaimed war on terror. Many feel that if the US concerns about Al Qaida operatives or foreign fighters inside Somalia grow, then it may arm the warlords to fight a proxy war against Islamists. This will destabilise the whole region. They argue that if the long-term interest of the US is to assure itself of access to the strategic Horn of Africa, it should do well to avoid escalation of current tensions and conflicts in Mogadishu. However, if the US supports the warlords, it would betray the Somali people and undermine international efforts to give the transitional government the legitimacy to restore stability and peace.

Assessment: Plausible Scenarios

With the rise of Islamic forces to power, Somalia today is at the crossroads— either the prospects for stability will brighten or the country and the region may move towards more conflicts and destabilisation. In the light of these situations, three plausible scenarios may unfold:

- An Islamic dictatorship may emerge in Somalia and the US will continue to support the warlords despite the fact that their worldview is far bleaker than that of the Islamist militants. The US may also support Ethiopian infiltration into Somalia, enraging both the Islamic fundamentalists and drawing resistance from the Somali people.
- Islamic forces may forge an alliance with the Transitional Federal Government and form a national unity government, backed by multilateral efforts of the “contact group” initiated by the US. The government may then secure popular support and wield requisite muscle power to maintain order. Reconstruction of Somalia would then take place under the aegis of the US and other European countries. A certain kind of stability would come in after 15 years of chaos and anarchy. High-level policy engagement would follow to revive a functioning administration and polity in Somalia.
- An alliance of the ICU and TFG does not materialise due to internal divisions between the moderates and radicals within the Islamic forces. ICU loses its balance in terms of gaining popular support and fulfilling its Islamic programme. Fragmented configuration of clan-based politics continues, with the likely re-emergence of warlords. Radical Islamic threat increases. To counter the threat, the US covertly backs the warlords and a peacekeeping mission is deployed by IGAD and AU, with the support of the UN. Somali mistrust for foreign intervention remains and the decade-old misery prolongs or exacerbates, contributing to tension and insecurity in the region, and leads to further destabilisation.

Given these plausible scenarios, the best strategy would be to attempt at reconciliation between the ICU and the TFG. The Islamic forces that have the popular support and the muscle power will then gain legitimacy and form a national unity government and become engaged in restoring order and normalcy, rather than heading towards Islamic extremism. It

will even be easier for the TFG to pursue the reconciliation process, as it will be dealing with one powerful force rather than fractions of clan-based groups. The reconciliation can be augmented at the multilateral level by the US through the contact group. In the process, rather than only serving its interests through its counter-terrorism policy, the US will be serving the interest of Somalia and also contribute to the restoration of peace, security and reconciliation.

References/End Notes

- ¹ The seven member-states of IGAD - Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda - cover an area of 5.2 million sq. km and have a population of more than 160 Million. The IGAD region is witnessing both internal and external conflicts; therefore the joint peace and conflict prevention efforts of IGAD member-states are crucial for peace and sustainable development of all countries.

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