Different times, same methods

The impact of the National Security Service on the operations of the National Intelligence and Security Agency[1]

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Abstract:

This article examines the impact of the National Security Service (NSS) on the operations on the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA). It begins with the short history of Somalia between 1960 and 1991 and then the article analyzes the activities of the NSS, the main intelligence apparatus of the Siad Barre regime, and the NISA, the primary intelligence service of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS). It contends that instead of reestablishing the NISA as an organization serving the interests of the general public, it continues to operate as an instrument of political power. The study argues that although times may differ, methods remain the same when scrutinizing the operations of these Somali intelligence apparatuses. There are many common features characterizing the agencies, including the governments' use of these intelligence services for the consolidation of their personal power, getting rid of political opponents or conducting extrajudicial activities. The interconnectedness of military and political power, the dominance of patron-client relationships, the conduct of intelligence and counterintelligence operations in neighboring countries, and the prioritization of clan loyalty are additional similarities. The reconfiguration and reorganization of the security sector is needed for peace to be restored in the country.

Introduction

Clanism and nepotism have played a central role in African postcolonial conflicts, since they have completely pervaded power struggles for government positions, state institutions and public funds in the continent. During the postcolonial period, the exploitation of authority and power was common practice among the military governments of Africa to discriminate in the treatment of their citizens by the use of predatory politics and personalization of power (Ingiriis, 2016a). Writing about the Horn of Africa at the end of the Cold War, Roy Pateman emphasized that with the intention of preserving national security, intelligence services seemed to be focused on gathering confidential data and information (Pateman, 1995). This argument may be correct, however, it does not explore the potential connection between the politicization of power and the operation of intelligence agencies.

While there have been a large number of studies dealing with the security sector in Somalia (Robinson, 2016; 2019a; 2019b; Hills, 2013; 2014a; 2014b), the intelligence apparatuses in the country have not been in the limelight of academic research (Ingiriis, 2020a; 2020b). This article begins with the short history of Somalia between 1960 and 1991 as an introduction to understand how fragile the country has been politically, economically, and socially since it gained independence. Then it analyzes the operations and activities of the National Security Service (NSS), the main intelligence apparatus of the Siad Barre regime from 1970 to 1990, and the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA), the primary intelligence service of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS). The study seeks to examine the impact of the former on the latter and identify similarities between the two intelligence agencies to determine if the flaws of the NSS continue to persist in the NISA or Somalia was able to learn from past mistakes and set up a more efficient intelligence apparatus.

The article adopts the qualitative research approach and is based on the application of various research methods, including studying reports, field interviews conducted in Mogadishu, document content analyses of open source, peer-reviewed academic works and journals. On top of them, despite them being fragmentary or politicized, media articles have been analyzed with the intent of painting a clearer image. The article is intended to enrich the growing literature on fragile and failed states in conflict-ridden societies as a whole, and intelligence and security studies in the Somali context in particular. Apart from the political field, the security sector is also of paramount importance, thus critically analyzing the operation and activities of the NSS and the NISA can help us better understand Somali conflict dynamics.

The short history of Somalia (1960-1991)

Following the independence of British and Italian Somaliland, the two territories were unified to form the Republic of Somalia on July 1, 1960 and Aden Abdulle Osman Daar became the first formally and democratically elected president of the Somali Republic. He served until

1967, during which time his main objectives were to rid the country of the remnants of colonialism and strengthen the unity of the Somalis. Nevertheless, his former Prime Minister, Abdirashid Ali Shermarke defeated him in the presidential election of 1967, becoming the second president of Somalia (Los Angeles Times, 2007).

The reason behind the transfer of power must have been Osman's stance to prioritize the economic and social issues prevailing in the country, instead of working towards realizing the concept of 'Greater Somalia', which was centered on the unification of all ethic Somalis (although at the expense of creating tensions with Somalia's neighbors) (Kiss-Besenyő-Resperger, 2014, pp. 39-42). Maintaining Ethiopian and Kenyan sovereignty over Somali territories seemed to be politically irreconcilable with the Daar's focus on internal development. At the same time, both the United States and the Soviet Union strived to bring the country under its influence that led to conflict within the government.[3]

The political career of Shermarke was cut short as he was assassinated by one of his bodyguards while visiting the city of Las Anod on October 15, 1969. Sheikh Mukhtar Mohamed Hussein became the interim president for a couple of days, after which Chief of the Somali National Army (SNA) and Major General, Mohamed Siad Barre staged a military coup against the civilian government on October 21, 1969 (Payton, 1980). He explained its necessity by stating that "intervention by the Armed Forces was inevitable. It was no longer possible to ignore the evil things like corruption, bribery, nepotism, theft or public funds, injustice and disrespect to our religion and the laws of the country" (Barre, 1970).

While Somalia may have appeared as a stable and emerging democracy for an outsider (besides peaceful transfers of power, the country had a free press with regular publications of anti-government material), the civil government was actually involved in various illegal activities, such as corruption, vote-buying and the (s)election of members belonging to their own clans for political positions. As David D. Laitin argues "what had started out as a putative nation was being torn apart at the seams through clan 'tribalism'" (Laitin, 1976, p. 452).

Siad Barre began the modernization and restructuring of the country from the previously democratic and sovereign state, the Somali Republic to the Soviet-style authoritarian military regime, the Somali Democratic Republic (Ingiriis, 2016a).[4] He built a top-down 'developmental dictatorship', which is conventionally defined as a system "that restricts the people's participation in politics based on the reason that political security is a prerequisite to economic growth" (Byeong-cheon, 2006, p. 5)He wanted healthcare and education to be available to wider social strata and he also invested in Somali community projects. In addition, he took up the fight against illiteracy and helped in the resettlement of drought victims. However, Siad Barre relied heavily on the military institution to consolidate his personal power, too.

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[3] For more information, see Robinson, C. D. (2019) 'Glimpse into an army at its peak: notes on the Somali National Army in the 1960-80s', *Defense & Security Analysis*, Vol. 35, No. 4 and Lewis, I. M. (1988) 'A modern history of Somalia: Nation and state in the Horn of Africa', Westview Press, London

[4] Castagno, A. A. (1970; 1969), 'Somalia Goes Military', *Africa Report*, pp. 25–27 and 'President's Assassination Followed by Coup', *Africa Research Bulletin*, Vol. 6, No. 10, pp. 1548–1551

With support received from the USSR, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Somalia was able to set up and modernize one of the best-equipped, largest, and well-trained armies in Sub-Saharan Africa (Ingiriis, 2016a).[5] In the Siad Barre regime, Somalia started to wage an increasing number of wars with some of its neighbors, including Ethiopia and Kenya. Before the 1977-78 Ogaden War, Siad Barre got substantial amounts of military assistance from the Soviet Union and economic support from the Arab states, China and the European Community. After breaking up with the USSR, it was the United States and the World Bank that provided all necessary aid to the country (Adam, 1992).

Under the leadership of Siad Barre, the Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC) became the governing body of the country. It suspended the postcolonial constitution, disbanded the National Assembly, arrested and detained prominent members of the Somali Republic and banned political parties (Metz, 1992, pp. 36-37). While in the late 1970s Barre's popularity rocketed during the Ethiopian-Somali War (due to the fact that the Somalis were unified by the concept of 'Greater Somalia'), the 1980s were characterized by growing opposition against the government that could be explained by the increase in autocratic rule, genocidal campaigns in the North, economic downturn and the government's abuse of power. The regime of Siad Barre was overthrown in 1991 by clan-based armed opposition groups in the Somali Rebellion, which can be viewed as the beginning of the ongoing civil war in the country (Metz, 1992, pp. 186-187).

The NSS

With help from the USSR, the National Security Service (NSS) was established in Somalia in 1970, which was modeled after the Committee for State Security (KGB) and had unlimited powers. Besides playing a significant role in the suppression of clans and getting rid of Barre's political adversaries, the NSS was in charge of espionage, information-gathering, reconnaissance, intelligence and counterintelligence. It was founded and led by Ahmed Suleiman Abdalla 'Dafle', a son-in-law of Siad Barre and member of the SRC.[6] Clan loyalty heavily impacted the selection and promotion of NSS soldiers, and the USSR also had a huge influence on the organization, since Somali intelligence agents were trained by the Soviets.

Furthermore, the Soviet Union wanted to exercise control over the NSS (subordinated to the Interior Ministry) and the SNA (subordinated to the Defense Ministry) by placing individuals loyal to the USSR in leading government positions. For instance, Abdikassim Salaad Hassan, both Interior and Finance Minister of the Barre regime, and Mohamed Ali Samatar, Somalia's defense minister, had previously studied in the Soviet Union (at Moscow State University and the Frunze Military Academy respectively) (Ingiriis, 2016b, pp. 125-126, 156). Siad Barre himself was also affiliated to the KGB, hence there is the possibility that the secret

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[5] 'Somalia: How Much Soviet Influence' (1973), *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 14, No. 14, pp. 1-3
[6] After becoming too powerful, Dafle was forced to resign. He was succeeded by General Mohamed Jibriil Muuse (1981-1986) and then Ali Hussein Dinle (1986-1991) as the head of the NSS.

service of the USSR was involved in the organization of the coup d'état. While the NSS and the KGB collaborated with each other in terms of planning and executing joint activities, misinformation about US operations was also spread to the Somali security unit (Andrew and Mitrokhin, 2006, pp. 447-449).

Since a large number of intelligence agents worked in the NSS, the operation of the agency required significant financial support from the government, which meant that funds had to be taken away from other sectors and reallocated to the organization. This way, they were able to install their operatives and informers in any stratum of Somali society. There was constant fear and suspicion, since nobody could be certain that their friends, relatives or even partners were not members of the NSS. Among the local population, the agency became infamous for conducting extrajudicial activities, such as the imprisonment, torture and even execution of individuals who were considered to be political adversaries of Siad Barre or who were thought to pose any threat to the regime (Ingiriis, 2016b, pp. 95-97, 113).

Not only were political opponents but also Islamic leaders and sheiks raising their voice against Barre's scientific socialism silenced. NSS agents constantly supervised mosques and other religious institutions, reporting on the sheiks' activities or causing damage to these Islamic centers (Ingiriis, 2016b, pp. 107-115; Metz, 1992, pp. 126-130).[7] The National Security Court (NSC), which was established to make the Somali population submit to the government of Siad Barre, complimented the activities of the intelligence agency, arresting and detaining individuals who were seen as enemies of the state. Under the direction of General Mohamoud Geelee, life sentences and public executions became commonplace, as there was no appeal – only in minor cases – against the verdicts of the NSC (Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio Rivoluzionario Supremo, 1971, p. 500).

Aside from the court, the NSS possessed its own interrogation centers and prisons. While the headquarters of the security service, its notorious underground jail, Godka ('the Hole') and the Central Prison were located in Mogadishu, there were other maximum security prisons in Bur Wein, Labaatan-Jirow and Lanta Bur (National Academy of Sciences Committee on Human Rights, 1988, pp. 17-19). They were all placed under NSS surveillance (along with other government and intelligence agencies) and were infamous for their torture methods, including the use of electric shock or forcing dissidents to drink sea water until they confessed a crime they had not even been involved in. Besides, torture could take a degrading and dehumanizing form, for example, individuals who were suspected of plotting against the government of Siad Barre had to get undressed, surrounded by their loved ones.[8] Detainments were considered as a source of income for NSS agents, and as long as prisoners had money, they could bribe the authorities and buy themselves out.

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[7] Telephone interview with Maryan Haji Elmi, August 30, 2014
[8] For more information on how the NSS interrogated people, see Askar, A. O. (1992), 'Sharks and Soldiers', Haan Publishing, Finland, pp. 11-13

Since many of the NSS agents lacked formal education, only oral reports attested to the killings of Somalis, whose deliberate or accidental deaths were considered as normal and natural by eyewitnesses. According to Law Number 14 of February 15, 1970, NSS agents had the power to 'search any person' without receiving any command to do so, and they also possessed the authority to 'enter any licensed [sic] premises]' and arrest 'any person' (Legge numero 14 del 15 febbraio, 1970; Istituzione del servizio di sicurezza nazionale, 1970, pp. 203-205). In addition to that, the establishment of the Office of Intelligence Information further expanded the powers of the security unit. With the intent of preserving scientific socialism in the country, all imported written material went through the hands of NSS agents. If they accepted the content of the books as satisfactory, Somalis could access them in libraries, however if they stumbled upon something that might have gone against the ideology of the regime, they were never made available to the public (Ingiriis, 2016b, p. 97).

The NSS continuously monitored postal traffic, communications, foreign operations, and radio broadcast, while conducting intelligence and counterintelligence activities not only in Somalia, but in neighboring countries too. According to the 1987 summary of the Defense Intelligence Agency, in order to provide help to Somali police forces and the SNA, the organization set up an antiterrorist unit and a "combat department composed of paramilitary forces trained by West German police advisory personnel" (Defense Intelligence Agency, 1987, p. 30). Following the 1977-78 Ogaden War, Somalia's relation with the USSR deteriorated, after the Soviets had decided to take sides with the country's historical nemesis, Ethiopia. As a consequence, NSS began to collaborate with secret services from the US and South Africa (Pateman, 1992, p. 576).

In the midst of internal and external pressures placed on the regime, Siad Barre proved to be unable to relinquish power. He dissolved the formidable NSS and the draconian NSC in August 1990, however, by that time there had been strong opposition to the government and much hatred in the Somalis towards dictatorship. Instead of striving for a peaceful transfer of power, he sent delegations to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the US and the USSR with the aim of getting economic and military support (Ingiriis, 2016b, pp. 212, 214-215). Disbanding the NSS and the NSC could not put an end to the nationwide rebellion that led to the fall of Barre's government and his going into exile to Nigeria.

The NISA

After the failure of UN peace operations (UNOSOM I and UNOSOM II), Somali armed groups and clans decided to establish the Transitional National Government (TNG) in 2000. Although it was unable to set up functional state institutions, reinstate the intelligence apparatus and provide security (Atta-Asamoah, 2013), since the TNG was rather engaged with the reconstruction of the police and the national army. Besides, there was growing Islamist influence in the country, as the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) was becoming more dominant in the southern parts of the country. Thus in 2004, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG)

was formed with American and Ethiopian support, which could reclaim parts of Somalia. Its first president, Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, was responsible for transforming the country's security architecture modeled on the Ethiopian National Intelligence and Security Service (Menkhaus, 2006).

Despite the presence of terrorist and armed groups, a slow stabilization process has been initiated in the country. Somalia's willingness to rebuild its security sector was attested by the creation of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) in 2012 and the reestablishment of its national intelligence service in the subsequent year. The powers of the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) were extended by Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud between 2012 and 2017, and now the organization receives continuous support from Somali civil and federal law enforcement agencies, AMISOM forces and foreign secret services.[9] While the country has set out on the road of stabilization, the Somali government appears to be only successful in its fight against al-Shabaab with the military assistance of AMISOM and financial support provided by the international community.

Following its expansion, the NISA was designed to be subordinated to the same purpose as the NSS, the personalization of power. With its empowerment, the government was able to suppress its political opponents and maintain order in territories controlled by them in the capital. As a way to consolidate his power, Hassan Sheikh resurrected the methods of Siad Barre's autocratic regime, for instance the arrest of individuals without any warrant who were 'allegedly' acting against the security of the state. During his presidency, the existence of the intelligence agency could be regarded as unconstitutional, since the application of Law Number 14 of the former military government was at odds with democracy (Yabarag, 2013).

Today, Somalis are continuously arrested by NISA agents for voicing their criticism against the government, even on social media. They are usually taken to NISA detention centers and maximum security prisons, including Mama Khadija, Party Investigations or Godka (Ingiriis, 2020b).[10] The detention of civilians, who are either supposed members of al-Shabaab or individuals thought to have committed a crime against state security, is financially advantageous for NISA agents. Even if it was proven that these people belonged to the terrorist group, they could always bribe intelligence authorities or political brokers and buy their way out of prisons or detention centers (Ingiriis, 2020b).[11]

Furthermore, similarly to its predecessor in the Barre regime and the military police of the Somali Democratic Republic, the national intelligence agency operates as a paramilitary force. It was a commonly held view in the government of Hassan Sheikh that combining the

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[9] These foreign services include the intelligence agencies of Somalia's neighboring countries, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, the United States and the United Kingdom. They provide both equipment and training to civil and federal law enforcement bodies in the country. However, intelligence-sharing between the FGS and these services is rather limited.

[10] Although, the government decided to close Godka in December 2018, Interviews with NISA agents in Mogadishu, July-September 2015 and May-July 2016

[11] Individuals who have no political or personal influence in the government or are suspected to be or have been in contact with al-Shabaab are interrogated upon detention to see if money could be extorted from them. Focus group discussions in Mogadishu, May-September 2015 and April-August 2016

experience of former veteran soldiers and members of the authoritarian regime would result in a more effective and efficient security agency. As Mohamed Haji Ingiriis pointed out, five out of the eight NISA directors were somehow involved in the Siad Barre regime and almost all of them had moved in political circles prior to their appointment (Ingiriis, 2020a; 2020b). On top of that, when a new president is elected, former commanders currently responsible for the security sector demand to pursue either diplomatic or political careers (Starkey, 2016).[12] The interconnectedness of military and political power and the dominance of patron-client relationships in the Somali context render the government impossible to establish functioning security institutions in the country (Africa Intelligence, 2016). Besides, silencing political adversaries has become the de facto 'prerequisite' for presidents to remain in power, thus establishing an apolitical intelligence agency does not seem to be the priority.

Under the presidency of Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed 'Farmaajo', the NISA was increasingly used to take up fight against the perceived enemies of the state and to promote the personalization of power. For example, without providing any specific reasons, intelligence agents arrested photographer and vlogger, Mukhtar Nur in July 2017. Only after he had been in custody for a couple of days and the hashtag #FreeMukhtarNuur had begun trending on social media was he released (Radio Dalsan, 2017). As a punishment for broadcasting anti-governmental content on Radio Hiigsi, editor of the station, Mohamed Abdiwahab Nuur, was taken to Godka, where he was tortured for three days before releasing him in March 2020 (Horn Observer, 2020). Farmaajo does not only work towards the oppression of political opponents, but also intimidates and threatens journalists and media practitioners, who voice their criticism against the regime (European Parliament, 2018).

Somali residents have always been reluctant to support the NISA wholeheartedly, since several members of the organization, as NSS agents at that time, were actively involved in the horrifying deeds of the Siad Barre government and those arrests, imprisonments, tortures or executions are still imprinted on their minds. Constant struggles with al-Shabaab provide a context for NISA to justify its extrajudicial operations, however the use of these activities can be considered as a source of public anxiety over the Somali government's power. According to the regime, al-Shabaab endangers state-building and securitization in Somalia, so the involvement of the national intelligence agency is needed. However, NISA agents are exempt from punishment, since "the interdependence between the government and [the intelligence agency] means there is no independent government office for people to complain about torture, murders, and misconducts" (Ingiriis, 2020b, p. 19).

The NISA appears to operate independently from the Ministry of Internal Security in Somalia, but, similarly to its predecessor, it conducts intelligence and counterintelligence activities outside the country, too. For instance, the organization installs their operatives as First Secretaries in the Somali embassies of its neighboring countries, such as Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya (Ingiriis, 2020b, p. 21). The NSS and the NISA both follow(ed) orders

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[12] Military commanders from Somalia were described as 'corrupt communist-era generals' by The Times.

unconditionally, however, the latter does not possess the relatively clear organization structure and hierarchy of the former. With the personalization of power and the adoption of authoritarian policies, Farmaajo may pave the way for further violence in the country.

Conclusion

As Aili Mari Tripp remarked, "African societies are constrained […] by political systems and weak institutions that are not conducive to good governance" (Tripp, 1997, p. 12). From a perspective of more than 20 years, unfortunately it seems to be true in the Somali context, since the security architecture in Somalia is still characterized by big-man politics. In addition to that, security institutions have always been favored to serve the interests (either personal or political) of the country's top leadership. These individuals clinging to power at any price have continually reshaped the security sector to make favorable "personal investments in reciprocal relations with other individuals as a means of achieving goals that are seen as otherwise impossible to attain" (Hydén, 2006, p. 73).

The study argues that although times may differ, methods remain the same when scrutinizing the operations of the above-mentioned Somali intelligence apparatuses. There are many common features between the NSS and the NISA, including the governments' use of these intelligence services for the consolidation of their personal power, getting rid of political opponents or conducting extrajudicial activities against individuals who voice criticism against the regime or purportedly commit anti-state crimes. Moreover, with the reintroduction of Law Number 14 of 1970, NISA agents can also enter buildings and search or arrest anyone without a warrant. The interconnectedness of military and political power, the dominance of patron-client relationships, the conduct of intelligence and counterintelligence operations in neighboring countries, and the prioritization of clan loyalty are other similarities that characterize the agencies. On top of that, the current Somali regime uses some of the same maximum security prisons and detention centers as Siad Barre did.

In lieu of striving to establish a stable security sector in the country, recent governments have tried to revive the autocratic regime and its tyrannical security architecture. Not only do the operations of the NISA aggravate insecurity in Somalia, but they also make already existing security institutions weaker. Preventing the Farmaajo government from bringing dictatorship into Somali politics and preserving the accountability and integrity of state institutions are of chief importance. For only through the reconfiguration and reorganization of the security sector will peace be restored in the country (Ingiriis, 2020b, p. 6, 23-24). The first step into the right direction could be an all-encompassing reform of the Somali intelligence apparatus to ensure that it will no longer be used for furthering personal objectives and eliminating political adversaries. Instead, it should be used to serve the interests of the general public. Without remodeling the security architecture in the country, the NISA, similarly to the NSS in the Siad Barre regime, will continue to operate as an instrument of political power.

Conflict of interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on contributor

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