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SOMALIA : NOMADIC INDIVIDUALISM AND THE RULE OF LAW

A talk by THE HON. MOHAMED HAJI IBRAHIM EGAL
Prime Minister of the Somali Republic

IT IS NOT easy to speak about Somalia. The very nature of the country, the way of life of its people, and their cultural background, appear to evade objective thought and rational explanation. Most of those who have chosen Somalia as a subject for their scholarship have found themselves the inevitable victims of one of two emotions : they have either become enamoured with the Biblical character of the Somali way of life, the rich and the poetical language of the people, the absolute independence of the Somali in character, thought, behaviour and intellect—which at times may appear to outside observers as even bordering close to anarchism ; or else they are overwhelmed with pity, by the harsh nature of the country's environment, the persistent fight of the Somali nomad against merciless odds, and his unawareness and even disdain for any association with modern technological advancements and amenities.

I shall attempt today to find a happy medium between these two extremes. However, being a Somali myself, I must forewarn and plead guilty to an element of pride in some of the characteristics of my countrymen. Even though many modern thinkers reject the validity of such a thing as a national character, I personally believe that a people living in a country, conditioned to the same elements, exposed to the same hazards, sharing the heritage of democratic traditions, bound by language, religion and culture, and linked together by the pursuance of a unique way of life, must inevitably develop similar inhibitions and attitudes as well as a common and unifying philosophical code of ethics and conventions. It is such ties that develop the characteristics common to a nation and which can be described as its national character. This national Somali character, therefore, with its strength, its weakness, but its truly sublime love of freedom, strong sense of unity, and independence of spirit forged over the centuries is what binds my people together and gives them a pride in their institutions.

Somalia is geographically an arid country in which life is difficult and in which the individual is engaged in a constant battle for survival. The vast majority of the Somali people follow their nomadic way of life not from choice but from the necessity of having continually to seek pastures for their livestock. Grazing and water for their livestock are almost never found in close

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proximity, and therefore the main part of the year is taken up by the great pre-occupation of moving the livestock to suitable pastures on the vast inland plateaux and then driving them back to water. This process is repeated at intervals of two to three weeks during the great dry season. The Somali nomadic mode of life being almost unique in the world, the Somali has never benefited from examples set elsewhere for the improvement and the amelioration of his life. Also the previous colonial regimes that ruled the two parts of the present Republic of Somalia made no serious attempts to interfere, for better or for worse, with this traditional way of life. The Somali nomad was thus left to his own initiative to develop those amenities which he considered to be suitable to his own environment, to improve the existence of both himself and his herds, and to build up an economy to sustain his essential needs.

Thus, practically unaided by any government, colonial or indigenous, he has had by his own initiative and ability to improvise means of bringing water nearer to the more permanent pastures for his livestock ; and for this purpose, he has constructed cemented water reservoirs to retain water available during the rainy season on the plateaux which ten years ago were only accessible to his livestock for a few months of the year. These reservoirs—which are roughly similar to your swimming pools in Europe—are now not only revolutionising the economy of the nomad by almost trebling the numbers of his livestock but, more important still, are creating permanent settlements which are slowly developing into pastoral/agricultural villages with the resultant need for social services. This development in the interior is happily matched by the determination of the Somali to seek outside markets for his livestock by trading with other countries. Again practically unaided by any government either colonial or indigenous, he has had the good sense and the acumen to recognise the potential and accessible markets for his livestock in the oil-rich Arab state across the Red Sea. Today there exists a flourishing export of livestock on the hoof to Saudi Arabia, to the Persian Gulf, to Egypt, to Kuwait and even as far as Iraq. This in turn has enhanced the breeding of livestock in the interior. These successful efforts are purely due to Somali diligence, initiative and enterprise in which I and any Somali can with justification take some pride.

I would now like to go back to the history and the origin of this resourceful individual, the Somali nomad. The origin of the Somali people, like that of most other nations, is lost in the mists of history and has likewise become the subject of mythical fables and folklore. Association with the Pharaohs as the Land of Punt is one of these mythological fables that has received credit because of certain evidences found in the ancient pyramids of Egypt. The history of myrrh and frankincense shrouds Somalia with unrelated allusions in ancient history. However my own belief is that the Somali people derive their origin from the ancient empire of Adde whose capital was Adari, now known as Harar, and whose main port was Audal now called Zeilah. This empire

flourished in the tenth and eleventh centuries A.D., and was part of the Arab expansion during the Khalifate Empire. It is my opinion that after the decline of that empire in the twelfth century those who stayed behind made their home in the Horn of Africa, in scattered settlements among the indigenous population.

There was naturally a period of chaos when Islamic traditions disappeared and the whole country reverted to its former paganism, tribal strife, and the 'law of the jungle'. This chaos lasted for a period of several decades. Across the Gulf of Aden, the rulers in Yemen were disturbed by the news of atrocities and the reversion to paganism which reached them from the country over which they had previously held suzerainty. At first they affected to ignore the situation, but eventually after a period of reorganization in their own country and the re-establishment of the Kingdom of the Imam, they decided to make another attempt at resuscitating Islamic traditions in the Horn of Africa. They decided to send over a group of eminent Sheikhs to settle at strategic points and to preach and bring the people back into the fold of Islam. So, in the earlier part of the thirteenth century, Islamic missionaries came back from Arabian Peninsula and re-established Islam and the rule of law. The task of these eminent Sheikhs was a tremendous one. Their main objective was to re-establish Islam and Islamic culture and to create a society that would last and develop within the traditions of the Islamic doctrine. So they took the easiest and most natural course. They chose and concentrated on that portion of the people with Arabic blood, the descendants of the people of the Adde Empire, who were living in scattered settlements, organized them politically, instructed them in the teaching of the Holy Koran and the Islamic tradition. The rest of the population were relegated to serfdom and assigned menial tasks. As the power of these people grew, they gradually expanded their suzerainty and pushed the other ethnic groups further west and south.

These Sheikhs who came over from Arabia attained positions of great stature and influence in the country. Their spheres of influence were so strategically placed that the location of their tombs today gives a clear impression of plan and purpose. They settled at strategic points along the coast of the Horn of Africa. Each one concentrated on a particular settlement for which he became a patron saint and over which he exerted a great spiritual and secular influence. They adopted an indigenous form of teaching the Arabic alphabet in the Somali language, so that the Holy Koran could be read in Arabic despite the fact that the Somali could not understand its meaning. Even today, almost every Somali can recite the Holy Koran in parrot fashion without understanding its import and meaning. These Sheikhs, however, achieved great success in the organization of the society and in the propagation of Islamic doctrine. Unfortunately, over the years, the myths surrounding these eminent Sheikhs have so developed and have become so engraved in the minds of the people that they are regarded today as being the actual ancestors

of the different tribal groupings of the Somali people ; and whereas, in fact, these present-day tribes are only the continuation of the settlements which these Sheikhs organized and developed as political units. It is these myths and this firm belief in one common ancestor for each tribal group that has set the pattern of Somali politics in the modern age.

It is perhaps one of the greatest ironies of the development of the Somali nation that, despite the original intention of these Sheikhs to bring about unity between the different settlements, these over the years developed into hard cores of legendary ethnic groups warring against each other in competition for domination over pastures and over water. It was in such a state of affairs that the first European travellers and colonisers of the Horn of Africa found the Somali nation. This rife atmosphere lent itself easily to the designs of those European and African powers who took part in the infamous scramble for Africa during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The British signed Treaties of Protection with the coastal tribes along the Gulf of Aden and those living in what later became the Northern Frontier District of Kenya in the south ; during the same period the Italians established their sovereignty over Mogadiscio and the neighbouring regions of Hiran and Alta-Juba ; and a few years later over-threw the Bogor of Mijertainia and the Sultan of Mudug. Emperor Menelik of Ethiopia followed suit by taking the Ogaden and part of what is now the Harar Province into his Empire ; whilst the French established themselves in Djibouti. This partition of the Somali territory and its peoples was incorporated in a number of treaties defining spheres of influence between these Powers. Throughout this balkanisation of the territory, Somali nationalism was dormant. Except for the isolated and unsuccessful efforts of Sayyid Mohamed Abdille Hassan, no unified resistance was offered by the Somali nation to the designs of those who arbitrarily divided their country and established suzerainty over their lives and lands. Even as late as 1946, inter-tribal competition, jealousy and suspicion was so dominant that the attempt made by Britain in the person of the Foreign Minister, the late Mr. Ernest Bevin, to unite the whole Somali territory under British sovereignty was not only opposed and thwarted by the major powers but was even resisted by the Somali people. That chance of reunification, lost in the middle 1940s, is now the utopia of all our endeavours and our diplomacy.

Soon after the last War, the first manifestations of Somali nationalism were kindled in Mogadiscio and the first political party was established on a national scale ; this was with the birth of the Somali Youth League, and the call of nationalism took possession of the soul and minds of the Somali people everywhere. From those early post-war days tribalism took second place and nationalism became the order of the day. The once arrogant, overpowering influence of tribal loyalties was replaced by national political consciousness.

The colonial powers recognised immediately the danger of this phenomenon

even before the Somali realized the impact and the import of this political and social revolution. As early as 1948, the Somali Youth League was banned and suppressed in the Ethiopian-held Somali territories as well as becoming a proscribed association in the Northern Frontier District of Kenya. In the former British Somaliland Protectorate, the colonial government's propaganda was still effective and the Somali Youth League never made headway : but the Somali National League was established and espoused the same objectives and political aspirations.

It is perhaps strange that the people who permitted without concerted resistance the partition of their territories and perhaps even indirectly encouraged and condoned its balkanisation should react so violently in 1954 to the cession of an area formerly held by the British to the Imperial Government of Ethiopia. This was, however, the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. In the middle of the nineteenth century, only a few years after Britain had cynically signed flamboyant Treaties of Protection with the people, it had secretly signed treaties with Ethiopia ceding to that country a portion of those very lands it had undertaken to protect. So, in 1954, at the zenith of the nationalist movement of Somalia, the cession of what was known as the Reserved Area and the Haud, the richest grazing areas of the land, their importance enhanced by the building of the cement permanent water reservoirs I have mentioned earlier, was like salt applied to a sore wound.

The dispute between Kenya and Somalia over the area formerly known as the Northern Frontier District, and predominantly inhabited by Somali people, is also a legacy of British colonialism. The British East Africa Company signed Treaties of Protection with the tribes and subsequently handed over responsibility for the territory to Her Majesty's Government. In 1915, the Jubaland was given to Italy as a bribe for entering the War on the side of the Allies, while the rest of the territory was administered as a self-contained and completely separate area from the rest of Kenya until 1963. It was known as a 'closed district' and its inhabitants could only visit other parts of Kenya by special permits and vice versa.

In 1962, at the London constitutional conference on Kenya, a delegation from the former NFD was invited to advise the Colonial Secretary of the political aspirations of the people. The delegation, led by their only member of Parliament in Kenya Legislative Council, demanded secession from Kenya and union with Somalia. The Colonial Secretary of the day gave the wise ruling that Her Majesty's Government would appoint a Commission to go to the NFD and ascertain the wishes of the people and would subsequently make a decision on the findings of this Commission. 87.76 per cent of the people of the NFD voted for union with the Somali Republic ; indeed, certain areas or districts were unanimous and without exception in their vote for union with Somalia. Despite this clear and undeniable manifestation, Her Majesty's Government decided to ignore the Report of the Commission and refused to

fulfil the hope and the aspirations it had raised by its own action and by its clear undertaking.

This unfortunate episode, nay, this classical example of the proverbial perfidy of Albion caused the rupture of diplomatic relations and the severing of the traditional ties between Somalia and Britain. Yet, throughout this long period of unfulfilled promises, of broken treaties and of deliberate lack of good faith, the Somali people have always maintained an inexplicable warmth and high regard for Britain. It is perhaps a great irony that the Somalis, of all the people in this world, should so genuinely and touchingly attribute to the British an unimpeachable sense of justice and fair play. With all due respect, in his own dealings with the British, the Somali was never shown an example of this quality which he so sincerely attributed to the British.

As regards the Ethiopian sector, the military occupation by Ethiopia of Harar in 1887 brought that country, for the first time, into direct contact with the Somali people. A parade of Secret Treaties in the last two decades of the nineteenth century gave Ethiopia a generous cut of the cake that was the Somali Territory. However, the first attempt of Ethiopia to demarcate a *de facto* boundary as a preliminary to setting up an administration was not made until 1934, when an Anglo-Ethiopian Boundary Commission arrived to implement the 1897 Agreement. This resulted in a storm of protest by the Somali peoples, but the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, following the outbreak of hostilities in 1935, caused the issue to fall in abeyance until the defeat of Italy, and the restoration of Ethiopian independence, in 1942. Here, as in the NFD, the Somali inhabitants had refused, and still categorically refuse, to accept foreign claims to their territory, and the whole area is under military rule as well as under emergency regulations. The continued unrest, together with the difficulties which the nomadic tribes encounter in their seasonal migrations, are a constant irritation and threat to stability ; which at times has even resulted not only in armed conflict between the Somali tribes and the Ethiopian occupation forces, but also in clashes between the Somali Republic and Ethiopia.

This lamentable partitioning of the Somali people and their territories has left the Somali Republic in a dilemma. As the only independent sovereign Somali state, it has assumed the inevitable role of championing the cause of those other Somali territories still under alien authority. These now find themselves, with the exception of French Somaliland, the unnatural and the unwilling appendages of other sister African states. Consequently, Somalia has found itself in confrontation with these African states.

Somalia on its part cannot understand how the natural political aspirations of the Somali peoples in these territories, and its own equally natural role and responsibility to their cause could possibly be misunderstood and taken amiss by any one with any clear knowledge and insight of the Somali problem. On the other hand, the leaders of our neighbouring states share the view that it

is intolerable to have a sister African state interfering with what they consider to be the internal affairs of their countries. These two diametrically opposed concepts of the problem have led to bitterness, to open conflict and to unbecoming postures and attitudes of confrontation.

Such was the situation which my Government inherited when it took office in July 1967.

We immediately decided to make this problem our first concern in formulating the new policies of the country. Naturally, the aims and the political objectives of the Somali people are unalterable and are enshrined in our constitution, viz, that we are obliged to seek the unification of the Somali territories through peaceful and legal means. It was however open to us to alter the policy of confrontation and to seek accommodation for a detente with our neighbours as a preliminary to creating a suitable atmosphere without abandoning the context of our political aspirations and objectives. From the outset, we made it clear on every possible occasion that, as the Somali Republic, we have no policy of aggrandizement against our neighbours, neither do we want to claim territory that is not our own. We are, however, irretrievably bound by unbreakable ties to our Somali brethren who still have not had the opportunity freely to choose their own political destiny. Of the five segments into which the Somali nation was artificially partitioned, only two, namely the Somali Republic, have attained their right of self-determination. It is only natural that the remaining three segments should also seek to exercise this freedom of political expression, and whether they obtain support from outside sources including Somalia is irrelevant to their own struggle for independence. The desire for freedom stems from within and is not being imposed from external sources as some would make the world believe. This innate national and political consciousness is the real root of the problem and the source of the continuous friction between the Somali peoples and the governments which now control them. Therefore, at the OAU Summit Conference in Kinshasa, I made tentative approaches to the leaders of both of our neighbours, and I am glad to say that my initiatives have been richly rewarded by a reciprocal show of goodwill and a desire for peaceful negotiations from my colleagues across the border. The Arusha Memorandum of Understanding which I signed with President Mzee Jomo Kenyatta last September has not touched upon the substance of our dispute with Kenya, but it has set up a firm foundation for an understanding and machinery for a mutual quest for a solution to the dispute. Its salient point is that Kenya recognises the existence of a major dispute and lends itself to seeking a solution for its settlement, whilst Somalia on its part undertakes to respect the sovereignty of Kenya. It is my sincere hope that in the process of discussing possible solutions to the dispute, and in the mental engagement of thinking out possible proposals acceptable to those directly involved, we shall eventually turn up

with an equitable solution acceptable to all concerned. In that alone, there is hope ; and there is no valid reason why there should not be a good chance for settlement so long as there is goodwill and so long as both parties are realistic in their approach. In the meantime, we have decided to leave the people in the area in peace in the pursuit of their daily life, unimpeded by emergency regulations and by political strife. I have great confidence in the personal relationship which I have established with the Mzee, and I am convinced that he is just as anxious as I am to solve this problem once and for all.

In conclusion, Mr. President, I would like to say that even though Somalia has never before taken a prominent role in African affairs, yet our people have shared the anxieties, the misgivings and the tribulations of other African states over certain events taking place on our continent. Prominent among those events is the question of Rhodesia and the illegal regime of Ian Smith. I do not think it is wise for African leaders to ignore facts and to blind themselves to the realities of any situation. I am for giving credit where credit is due, because it is only then that the condemnation of the wicked can be forceful and effective. I should like to pay a special tribute to the present Government of Her Majesty for the decision to continue their arms embargo against South Africa. This measure is all the more significant as it was taken at a time when Britain was in the grip of its greatest financial crisis. I know that this decision was made out of deference to African public opinion, and therefore, it would be more than unfortunate if African leaders failed to appreciate this most magnanimous gesture of goodwill to Black Africa. Nevertheless this appreciation is no compensation for our disappointment and abhorrence of the policy of Her Majesty's Government towards Rhodesia and towards the illegal regime of Ian Smith. An eminent spokesman of the Labour Party said in a recent BBC interview 'that sanctions against Rhodesia had not failed but only they had not succeeded.'! I can only say that this is a subterfuge of the flimsiest guise, and the closing chapter of the splendour and the glory of the British Empire should have had a worthier and a more becoming finale than the tolerance of the absolute negation of its lofty fundamental principles by a band of terrified traitors.