From Grievance to Greed in Somalia

The Formation, Failure and Fall of the United Somali Congress
(1989-1991)

Amertume et avidité en Somalie. La formation, l'échec et la chute de l'United Somali Congress (USC)

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/26951>
DOI: 10.4000/etudesafriaines.26951
ISSN: 1777-5353

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 September 2019
Number of pages: 783-814
ISSN: 0008-0055

Electronic reference

Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, "From Grievance to Greed in Somalia", *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 235 | 2019, Online since 01 January 2022, connection on 08 January 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/26951> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafriaines.26951>

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The Formation, Failure and Fall of the United Somali Congress (1989-1991)*

On the night of 26 January 1991, a popular uprising in the Somali capital Mogadishu, led by the United Somali Congress (USC), a Hawiye-dominated armed opposition movement that was formed two years earlier, outshined other contemporary movements by speedily finishing off—as a result of a fortnight fighting—the two-decade-long authoritarian military regime of Major General Mohamed Siad Barre.¹ Soon after Siad Barre, who had reigned since 21 October 1969, escaped in a tank convoy to his Mareehaan clan's stronghold in the Gedo region, jubilant and joyful masses took to the streets of Mogadishu. People celebrated in and outside the Villa Somalia (the presidential palace), which was built by the fascist Italian colonial state for colonial masters that ruled southern Somalia between 1922 and 1941 (Ingiriis 2016a). Celebrations were extended as far off as Europe and the United States of America. Curiously, but crucially, some Somali diaspora communities, especially in the Washington DC. area, appeared cognisant that restoring law and order to a country ruined by lengthy brutal dictatorship would not be an easy task. Dima Zalatimo (1991: 24), a correspondent for the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, referring to an exiled Somali named Omar

* This paper was the result of research questions raised at an interdisciplinary research conference titled “National Liberation Fronts as Governments” sponsored by the Nordic Africa Institute at Uppsala University in Sweden in 6-7 October 2014. I am grateful to all scholars who attended that conference for their stimulating discussions.

1. Some studies went so far as to condense the USC into an Abgaal and Habar Gidir movement (SSEREO 2003: 35). Not necessarily an exclusive Hawiye movement, the USC “originally included multiple clans but eventually concentrated on providing security and pursuing the interests of the Hawiye kin group” (DUFFIELD 2013: 15).

Haji Saleebaan in Washington, prophetically predicted: “It will be difficult to restore law and order” since “[e]veryone in the country owns an AK-47.”²

Somalia, in 1991, turned into a state that was abysmal, at best, and apocryphal, at worst: what followed Siad Barre’s fall and flight is still considered *burbur* and *baa ba’* (collapse and catastrophe). Not only did the rule of law disintegrate, the entire state structures had collapsed.³ This fact put a dent in the optimism and euphoria, which had been building momentum, when the persistence of the violent political culture that had developed over two decades of dictatorial reign did not spontaneously disappear after 1991. Far from the expectations of the military adventures that began in the mountains of Mustahiil, near the Ethiopian border, the USC victory, which had motivated the massive cheers, soon culminated in calamity. As a direct consequence of the state’s collapse, the USC leaders found themselves in the midst of clanic cataclysms punctuated by increasingly random violence left behind by the deposed dictator.⁴ Evoking clanship as a rallying cry to garner support (Greenfield 1991), Siad Barre thwarted the USC’s attempts to find an alternative route to reach out to other clans as opposed to turning inward for support, when he refused to accept defeat and decided to return forcefully to Mogadishu.

As a result, the subsequent political conflicts in (southern) Somalia led to a stalemate with a no winner/no loser situation, a phenomenon that made the conflict appear as a clan war (Ingiriis 2018). This article delves deeply

2. The estimate given by the international NGOs and the CIA that one third of the population of the capital was fully armed was very conservative. An American correspondent conversant with the Somali issues observed in Mogadishu in the early 1990s that those armed appeared to be more numerous than those unarmed (KHALID 1998: 52-95).
3. Interview with General Osman Haji Omar (“Falco”), telephone conversation, 19 June 2014; interview with Abdullahi Mohamed Geeddi (“Khaddaafi”), London, UK, 29 March 2014. For further details, see BESTEMAN (1996), BRONS (2001), HASHIM (1997), KUSOW (1994), OMAR (1992).
4. Prior to being toppled, Siad Barre called his wider clan-group to fend off his regime and, when such clannish attempts, famously known as *Darbi Daarood* (the Daarood Fence) were not materialised, he ensured—as he previously pledged—that no state system worth seizing would be captured behind him (*The Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 1990, p. 4). As D. ROTHCHILD (1995: 66) reported: “Heavy fighting took place in the streets of the capital, involving protracted battles between pro-Barre members of the D[a]aro[o]d clan and the predominantly Hawiye USC members.” As LEWIS (1994) also noted, Siad Barre’s “call on the Daarood to kill Hawiye in Mogadishu” was duly responded to by militias belonging to his immediate clan, Mareehaan, his mother’s, Ogaadeen, and his son-in-law’s, Dhulbahante (the so-called MODH coalition). Not only the MODH, but also many members of the Majeerteen—a clan initially opposed to his rule—joined Siad Barre’s ranks in the midst of the popular uprising that ousted him (AROMA 2005b: 165; COMPAGNON 1990: 31; GASSEM 1994: 73-74). For witness statements of several former senior regime officials, see DUALEH (1994: 145-154), GHALIB (1995: 211-213). One vivid witness account on how Siad Barre fled the Villa Somalia was provided by AFRAH (1991).

into the heart of it, analysing the clan and the conflict by assessing the roots of USC's power struggle. Thus, this contribution to the scholarship on armed opposition groups adds nuanced historical explanation to the studies on the post-liberation movements in Africa. By nuancing the USC trajectory, we come to a clearer understanding of its formation and failure. Investigating the USC reveals why its leaders were unsuccessful at establishing the rule of law for more than a decade (1991-2000), a situation which Maria Brons (2001) thoughtfully described "from statelessness to statelessness." As Harry Verhoeven (2012: 273) observed in Rwanda: "Post-liberation politics across Africa is characterised by the 'commitment problem' that arises when former rebels try to share power." The case of the USC leaders resonates with Friedrich Nietzsche's caution, unlike Niccolo Machiavelli (cited in Adam 2008: 18), that "[t]hose who set out to destroy monsters must beware they do not become monsters themselves."

Although all other Somali movements in post-Siad Barre Somalia warrant per separate scholarly treatment, as they are understudied in the scholarship due to a lack of comprehensive empirical study on the subject, this article is concerned with the emergence of the USC: its strengths and weaknesses as well as its constraints and contradictions. This conceptual clarification of the USC provides valuable new insight into—and a new framework for—understanding the politics of the early 1991 Somali conflict. This article shows that the main crucial part of the USC's fall and failure lay in the organisational founding structure. Interrogating—which is to say, critically engaging with—the USC through the concept of "greed and grievance" (Collier & Hoeffler 2004), this analysis provides an in-depth assessment of the formation, failure and fall of the USC, arguing that the movement began as a legitimate cause though vanished as an illegitimate consequence in the end. It is *damac* (greed) to which the USC poetic discourse and primary documentation attributed the fierce fighting between the two main movement leaders—Ali Mahdi Mohamed and General Mohamed Farah Aideed—who their rivalries set the movement up for an utter failure. Though greed cannot be taken for granted, at least in the way Collier and Hoeffler (2004) proposed, one should take into account the hurried early adventure of power competition. The USC infighting demonstrates the genesis of how a grievance-based war could end up with greed-based competition for power and resources. This was also the case in Congo DR where the long struggle of Laurent Desire Kabila culminated in violent contestation between the Parti de la révolution populaire (PRP).

Putting the USC in a Global/Regional Perspective

Why did the USC leaders fail to sustain as a movement? The consistent claim provided by their proponents to explain this phenomenon is that the movement was thwarted from the outside, alluding to an Italian intervention. But this singular attribution should not be taken at face value, given that the successive leaders at France's Élysée Palace sought to destroy the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) government in Rwanda to no avail, more so for the Nigerian government attempts to defeat the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (Keen 2005: 37; Prunier 1995: 336). Unlike the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in May 1991, the RPF in Rwanda in April 1994 and, a bit earlier, the National Resistance Army (NRA) in Uganda in January 1986, the USC in January 1991 faced crucial institutional challenges which prevented it from being able to form a stable state. Where most armed opposition movements in most African states took over existing state structures, in Somalia the USC leaders encountered an internal burden: a lack of resources, inconsistent external support and scant means of "extraversion" (Bayart 2013). Peter Biles (1991) observed in Mogadishu in 1991 that, given the magnitude of the state's collapse, everything had to be started from scratch. Observers, such as Biles, characterised the fall of the military regime as a collapse of the Somali state. This was, nevertheless, not the case, although it was the end of the unified Somali state (the Somali Democratic Republic), the war itself was not, as such, a "new war" but an old war that had begun with the forceful takeover of the state by the military regime (see Bøås 2005 on a similar trend in Liberia).

In addition to institutional challenges and structural determinants, the political problems that became a barrier to the USC plans for a peaceful Somalia were increasingly constrained by practical predicaments. How they could manage to discipline their fighters or disarm civilians who had taken substantial possessions of massive modern weaponry which had been sent to Somalia as part of the Cold War arms donations during the Siad Barre regime? This obstacle to peace also affected how they could share state power among themselves and with others, ultimately the most difficult issue that led to protracted war. The USC leaders had their own share of the blame, as they were embroiled in internal conflicts and political infighting, which were nonetheless not isolated from outside pressures and moreover exacerbated by external interventions. Like in Congo (DRC), the Somali situation was always one with "many cooks in the same kitchen" (Reyntjens 2009: 244). Furthermore, the USC leaders—due both to their power ambitions and to the weakness of the movement's institutional foundation right from the beginning—became susceptible to many manipulations and exploitations both inside and outside. Indeed, the influence of the USC's institutional

structures, the legacies left behind by the ousted regime and external pressures led the USC leaders to lose the smell and the sight of the state they had captured.

Academic literature on African armed groups has tended to attribute failures to “big man” politics and individual personalities and rarely located how institutional frameworks set in place do impact on their maintenance. The formation, failure and fall of the USC, a theme not extensively analysed thus far, has always been a mystery to those studying the 1990s Somali conflicts and convulsions. The scant historiography on the Somali armed movements does not provide an answer. Comprised of two types—those written before 1991 (Bongartz 1991; Compagnon 1990, 1992; Prunier 1990; Samatar 1990) and those written after 1991 (Bradbury 1993; Lewis 1994; Samatar 1991a, 1997)—this scholarship was concerned with the early stages of the Somali National Movement (SNM) or the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) and it has not methodically taken the USC into account. This means that the USC has not received the same degree of scholarly attention as other coeval Somali armed liberation movements. This is rather surprising as the USC was decisively the only armed group that expelled Siad Barre from Mogadishu. Indeed, no other armed movement has had, by far, as powerful an impact as the USC on the political configuration and continuum of post-Siad Barre Somalia. The treatment of the armed movements was severe when Siad Barre was in power or even after his flight. Abdi Samatar (1992: 637) recognises the USC as “one of the opposition factions in the southern region.” Depriving the USC of its national connotation by pulling it out from its connection with other armed movements, Samatar claims in a very severe tone, unfair to the movement, that the USC “destroyed more people and property than the military régime (*sic*)” (*ibid.*).⁵ Failing to contextualise the contemporary conditions, Samatar’s perception does not accommodate institutional constraints and state collapse as the reason why the USC failed to govern the country.

Unlike its counterparts, the USC was committed to conquering the whole of Somalia. It is important to revisit the failure and fall of the USC to understand why the Somali state was not reconstituted in 1991 on the eve of Siad Barre’s fall. A focus on the USC may not indicate how the collapse of the Somali state

5. In a commentary on 1991 Somalia, Abdi Samatar denounces the USC and the SNM but says nothing about the SSDF or any other armed opposition movement. Other observers have also critically attacked the armed opposition groups (COMPAGNON 1998: 73-89; MAHADALLA 1998: 167). For an earlier anti-opposition movement diatribe, see SHEIKH-ABDI (1980). On the contrary, BAKONYI (2009) provides an interesting study synthesising the armed movements and their moral economy. By narrowing down her study to focus on how fighters were mobilised, she traces the patterns of violence in Somalia between 1988 and 1992. For a detailed appraisal on the history of the Somali armed groups, see the case study on the SNM, SSDF and USC by INGIRIIS (2017).

occurred, as such, but it explores much about the disasters that emerged from it. It is impossible to grasp various intersecting political convolutions and convulsions without considering the USC's early formalistic and formulistic creation. A historical approach at delving deeper into who ruled what and whom allows us to go beyond the simplistic reductionist explanations of the armed African conflicts. Challenging both primordialist and constructivist paradigms, which have subsumed the conflict into either materialist, clanist or personalist terms, uncovers institutional and structural flaws. The fact that neither faction could defeat the other, once and for all, was one of the reasons why no group became successful in forming a government. Rather, the culmination was surprising state collapse and chronic political fragmentation with a continuation of the armed conflict.

The USC Evolution and Emergence

One of the profound legacies of the Siad Barre regime was the creation and compulsion of critical conditions that forced political opposition groups to form armed movements attacking Somalia from Ethiopia, Somalia's traditional nemesis (Ingiriis 2016a). In the summer of 1972, the first Hawiye group—mostly businessmen—fled to East Africa after the execution of General Salaad Gabeyre Kediye, a senior Hawiye army officer, the same year when Idi Amin had expelled Ugandan Asians from Uganda. Though not as massive and systematic as it was in Uganda, many Hawiye—if not most of those who escaped—fled the military regime and left their wealth and possessions behind, only for these to be subsequently expropriated and distributed to Siad Barre's clan cronies (Aroma 2005a, b; see also Adam 2008; *Africa Watch* 1990; Elmi 1992; Ghalib 1995). Brutally suppressed, so much so that state terror was unleashed not just on those who lived in Somalia, but also on their diaspora in Kenya, the Hawiye people felt traumatised under oppression. The Siad Barre regime went so far as to convince the Daniel arap Moi regime in Kenya to deport the Hawiye businessmen in Nairobi in 1989 (Lochery 2012). Many of these ended up deported and detained without trial in Somalia. When some Hawiye members demonstrated stiff resistance from within Somalia, the Siad Barre regime threatened them with the use of lethal nerve gas should they not stop resistance (Prunier 1990: 117). Defections of their army officers simmered in Somalia until they formed an armed opposition movement to fend themselves off from further attacks.⁶ On 12 January 1989 at the Hotel Andalus in Rome,

6. PRUNIER (1990: 108), who travelled with the SNM fighters in the bush, has noted meeting Hawiye officers and soldiers defected to the SNM in the 1980s.

Italy, exiled Hawiye political actors had to declare the formation of the USC following a series of consultations.⁷ Ali Mohamed Ossoble “Ali Wardhiigley,” was chosen as a leader. A gifted politician with a strong aversion to the Siad Barre regime (a government he had never joined unlike most of his peers), Ali Wardhiigley was the most senior Hawiye elder at the gathering, having been the Health and Labour Minister of Somalia from July 1967 until March 1969. After three years as the only deputy chairman of the USC, he had a falling out with the SNM leaders on a political disagreement with the chairman Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud “Siilaanyo,” an economist who had served as the Minister of Planning under Siad Barre for close to 13 years (1969-1982). Before the USC creation, some Hawiye men who were loyal to the SNM had declared what they called the SNM Southern Front in 1987 (Elmi 1992: 30).

Aside from the state terror that the Siad Barre regime unleashed upon civilians belonging to the Hawiye clan-group, the formation of the USC was a swift reaction to a growing alienation they suffered under the SNM and the SSDF. First under the SSDF and second under the SNM, many Hawiye used to complain about the Hawiye suffering what one informant described a “double marginalisation”—which is to say, running from the oppression of the military regime to the authoritarianism of the opposition movements.⁸ However, the USC formation stemmed from an idea by Ali Wardhiigley to establish an opposition movement for the Hawiye. Given the previous distribution of power in the SSDF where Mohamoud Saleeban/Majeerteen political actors were leading while the then power sharing of the SNM had Isaaq representatives dominant, the foundation of a Hawiye-dominated movement was deemed necessary for the run up to the post-Siad Barre Somali political configuration. The early Hawiye forces had hitherto been divided between the SNM and the SSDF (Ingiriis 2017). Whereas those from the Saleebaan/Habar Gidir/Hawiye were with the SSDF, the Sa’ad/Habar Gidir/Hawiye were with the SNM. The USC declaration set the tone for the initial conviviality amongst the Hawiye clan. Unlike the SSDF and, to some extent, the SNM, the USC leaders boasted they did not obtain financial support from an external patron. Since the SSDF was financed and funded by Libya and Yemen, the SNM by the Isaaq diaspora in the Gulf States, the USC’s finances emanated from the Hawiye business community in Mogadishu.⁹ Similar to the SSDF, which depended on the Majeerteen civilians for their fighters, but unlike the SNM, whose forces

7. Interview with Professor Omar Hassan Gaalaguul,” VOA Somali, 19 October 2009; telephone interview with Mohamed Jili’ow Teenis, 1 July 2014; *THE INDIAN OCEAN NEWSLETTER* (1989: 3).

8. Telephone interview with Jama Mohamoud Ali, 5 January 2015.

9. Telephone interview with Mohamed Jili’ow Teenis, 1 July 2014.

comprised across clan lines at least initially, the USC drew fighters belonging to the Hawiye and several allied clans.¹⁰ However, all the movements began as armed political movements, but the speed the SNM and the USC garnered support from their masses underscores the consequences of the selective campaign of annihilation carried out by the Siad Barre regime.¹¹ An offshoot of the SNM, the USC had an *isbahaysi* (alliance) with its parental movement and the Somali Patriotic Front (SPM), led by Colonel Ahmed Omar Jeas, a Reer Isaaq/Ogaadeen. By contrast, whereas the SNM and the SSDF turned into political entities, the USC struggled to do so. The irony was that, while the USC fought for seizing the state and, at the last minute, the SSDF joined the Siad Barre regime which held that state, the SNM leaders insisted on achieving independence from the state, but kept their intentions to themselves.¹² Thus, the SNM attacked the state, while the USC targeted the Siad Barre regime, because each pursued competing and contrasting political goals inside and outside their professed objectives. This is not because the aims of the SNM were different from those of the USC (as was the case of the SPM).

Compared to the quantitative power of other movements, the declaration issued by the USC proved to be a qualitative victory, altering the face of the armed opposition by ultimately proving to be the one and only movement that successfully ousted the Siad Barre regime (Brons 2001: 157; Ingiriis 2016a: 229). As the USC won the “bush war” with exceptional success, it could not be expected to ensure the same success on the political front. By 1989, more than ten years had elapsed when the first armed movement tasked itself to topple the regime. The prospects for other movements (and some had ceased to be, like the SSDF) to overthrow the regime was very dim (*The Indian Ocean Newsletter* 1988: 5). To put it in proper perspective, even though the other armed movements were fighting against the Siad Barre regime, they were unable to finish off the job until the USC came to the fore. In late 1989, after serving as the dictator’s military adviser, General Aideed resigned as Somali Ambassador to India and joined the USC.¹³ He first visited Rome from New

10. Interviews with the USC war veterans, Mogadishu, 9 July 2016. BAKONYI (2010: 437) erroneously includes the Hiiraan region in the SSDF areas predominantly inhabited by the Majeerteen clan. On the contrary, the SSDF movement, which was dominated by the Omar Mohamoud sub-clan, counted on Northern Mudug and parts of the southern Nugaal for support. The majority of the Majeerteen people in the Bari region, mainly the Osman Mohamoud and the Ali Saleebaan sub-clans, as well as the less numerous Bi’iidyahan and Reer Mohamoud, were supporting Siad Barre.

11. For a detailed analysis, see INGIRIIS (2016b).

12. Interviews with SNM war veterans, Hargeysa, 14–16 July 2016.

13. His name is also spelled as Aidid, Aydid, Aydiid or even in Somali as Caydiid or Ceydiid. In this article, we use Aideed not only to capture the long vowel of the name but also to allow others to easily pronounce.

Delhi without informing the USC leaders in Italy of his travel arrangements. By the time Aideed had finally reached Addis Ababa and later Dirirdhabe (Compagnon 1991), he had unilaterally negotiating with the SNM (Ingiriis 2017). Soon thereafter, Aideed went to meet the USC-affiliated fighters near Mustahiil and sought to utilise his military experience. He realised from his assessment that, although the movement was economically and politically powerful, it was not so militarily.¹⁴ After the USC military officers elected him as a leader, Aideed began to re-organise the military wing which transformed the USC into a force with which to be reckoned. Upon initial screening, Aideed's political performances were ambivalent. Although he later caused a division within the USC, he initially succeeded in heading the USC forces from bases inside Ethiopia to inside Somalia.¹⁵ Between January and November 1989, the USC activities mainly consisted of political lobbying, negotiation with other armed opposition movements and funding for an armed wing. The first direct military confrontation was when Hawiye forces in the Gaalka'yo military brigade defected and interrupted Siad Barre's forces in a massacre against the Sa'ad/Habar Gidir/Hawiye in Mudug.¹⁶

The USC Foundations and Formulations

Whilst possessing a comprehensive constitution and agenda right from the beginning, the USC lacked a cohesive organisational structure (Ingiriis 2017). It was founded alongside an eclectic institutional framework comprised of a political wing based in Rome, an economic wing based in Mogadishu and a small disorganised military wing based in the Somali region, each produced and possessed three different leaders. Fusing politics with economics, the political and economic wings were much more interconnected than the isolated and insular military wing. This tripartite genesis of the USC meant that its formation as an opposition movement not only lacked a single unified authority, but also lacked proper coordination, such that it functioned poorly, and would even come to a standstill; all of which would eventually lead to disaster. As we will see, the early institutional cleavages were about to lead to the contestations and conflicts within the USC. As daring as he was, General Aideed, who was tasked to lead the military wing, crossed from the military to the political wing, proclaiming himself a USC chairman, a move

14. Interviews with the USC war veterans, Mogadishu, 9 July 2016.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Telephone interview with Colonel Muhiddiin Mo'allim Osman "Muhiddiin Badar," 7 July 2014.

and manoeuvre he enacted unbeknownst to and without the acceptance of the other wings.¹⁷ More an act of mimicry than a novel attempt, Aideed was apparently aware of an earlier SNM *coup* during which the military members of the movement had successfully ousted their civilian leaders (Ingiriis 2017). Because the *coup* was carried out on the ground, in the military field, the SNM civilian leaders had to accept the outcome.¹⁸ By contrast, the USC's political, economic and military leaders lived in three different countries, with three difficult institutional configurations. In a letter to Aideed, the economic wing dismissed his claims of the chairmanship, bluntly suggesting that he take "his fingers out from politics."¹⁹ Thereupon, many USC rank-and-file fighters in Ethiopia refused to take orders from him, as recalled by the then military commander of the movement.²⁰

General Aideed had his plans to seize the overall command and control of the USC by hook or by crook. The mysterious deaths in an Italian hospital of the putative political actors of the Hawiye, Ali Wardhiigley and Ismail Jimale Ossoble, the latter considered by many as a would-be successor to Siad Barre, served Aideed's ambitions very well. Ismail was thought to be the man who convinced Aideed to join the USC and he was also a political actor enjoying good terms with Aideed.²¹ However, Aideed knew what he was doing as there was no real power vested in the interim USC leader Hussein Ali Shiddo, who assumed the chairmanship after the death of Ali Wardhiigley. Fishing from murky political waters, Aideed approached the Mengistu security services in Ethiopia and advocated the arrest of this leader in order for him to usurp the USC chairmanship.²² Sympathetic to Aideed, whom they deemed a professional military man capable of deposing Siad Barre and his regime, the Ethiopians immediately met his demands and detained the USC interim

17. Interviews with the USC war veterans, Mogadishu, 9 July 2016; telephone interview with Colonel Muhiddiin Mo'allim Osman "Muhiddiin Badar," 7 July 2014; telephone interview with Colonel Omar Saleebaan, 25 December 2014.

18. Interviews with SNM war veterans, Hargeysa, 14-16 July 2016.

19. "Ku: Guddiga Odayaasha Shirka Leh" (a handwritten letter written by General Mohamed Farah Aideed in response to a letter sent to him by the USC businessmen in Mogadishu). Copy on file with the author.

20. Telephone interview with Colonel Muhiddiin Mo'allim Osman "Muhiddiin Badar," 7 July 2014.

21. Interviews with former USC activists in Rome, 23-26 October 2018. Telephone interview with Abdi Farah Jama "Abdi Dheere," 31 July 2014. The former Somalia officer for Amnesty International, Martin Hill, who worked with him as a human rights defender, insisted that Ismail Jimale was not part of the USC establishment (telephone interview with Martin Hill, 6 June 2014).

22. Interviews with the USC war veterans, Mogadishu, 9 July 2016.

chairman.²³ Aideed's subsequent *coup* and claim that he was an elected USC chairman generated suspicion and opened a Pandora's box within the movement.²⁴ It would take more than a year for Hussein Ali Shiddo to get out of jail.

Manpower and Military Means of the Conflict

The political, economic and military rivalries among the three wings of the USC notwithstanding, there was no doubt that the USC was made effective and a force with which to contend under the leadership of General Aideed, who succeeded in reforming the military wing, re-establishing a small militia and relocating the base to Somalia. Aideed's successful military campaigns and conquests of massive territories in the central regions encouraged the Hawiye masses in Mogadishu to rally behind him and defy the routine pillaging acts of the Red Berets, the specially-trained military police of the Siad Barre regime based in the Villa Somalia.²⁵ Advancing from Farjanno on his way to the capital city, while drawing his fighters from the Hawiye lumpen youth in both rural and urban areas, Aideed rapidly recruited from those marginalised by the Siad Barre regime, a tactic which led to a sequence of military gains (Aidid & Ruhela 1994). His fighters waited for the moment to come when they could punish a regime that had destroyed their families and made them poor while having their rival clan members prosper. Some of these fighters took such Sylvester Stallone-style movie names as Rambo or a Somalised version of it, like *Daroogo* (drugged out), names standing as an elusive resistance to the ruling regime.²⁶ The collapse of moral education and the formal economy had also contributed to the urban masses reinforcing the USC, while in the rural areas, youths who had witnessed their families being terrorised by the regime joined Aideed's ranks *en masse*. It was not difficult for them to support Aideed; his military wing favoured a violent method for the ousting of the Siad Barre regime in contrast with the leaders of the political and economic wings who preferred political negotiations and economic concessions with

23. Interview with General Mohamed Nuur Galaal, Mogadishu, 20 September 2015.

24. Interviews with the USC war veterans, Mogadishu, 9 July 2016; telephone interview with Ishaq Nuur Hassan, 25 December 2014; telephone interview with Colonel Omar Saleebaan, 25 December 2014.

25. Interviews with the USC war veterans, Mogadishu, 9 July 2016.

26. For similar observations in Sierra Leone, see KEEN (2005: 74) and RICHARDS (1996: 136). Nevertheless, unlike Sierra Leone, there was no forced conscription in the USC. Rather, there were voluntary fighters as mirrored in other African armed movements. A noteworthy exception was during Siad Barre's era where the Bantu/Jareer communities in southern Somalia were forcefully conscripted into the army in the 1980s to fight in Northwest Somalia (present-day Somaliland).

the regime.²⁷ Aideed finally expelled Siad Barre from Mogadishu but did not inherit any viable state structure to capture. Succeeding militarily was one thing but political success was another. This was an indication that the most critical factor for the USC was to translate its military victory into a political victory. Because both needed careful planning, the political aspect entailed concession and compromises under constant negotiations, a practice that the military operations did not approve. Upon the USC capture of the capital city, the three diametrically opposing wings were enlarged: the political wing led by Hussein Ali Shiddo of the original Rome group, the economic wing led by Hussein Haji Mohamed Bood of the Mogadishu group, and the military wing led by General Aideed of the Farjanno group. The common positions of the political and economic wings were so powerful that it became a patterned prevalence and public perception that post-Siad Barre Somalia did not need another military ruler, given the frightening experiences and exercises of Siad Barre.²⁸ Those who defended this position seemed to ignore that Aideed (Samatar 1997) was the man of the moment since post-Siad Barre Somalia warranted a military leader capable of securing peace. On 29 January 1991, within two days after Siad Barre's ouster, the unilateral declaration by the economic wing of the USC, now backed by the less powerful political wing, with the support of the Manifesto Group elders (Ingiriis 2012), selected Ali Mahdi Mohamed as president without consultations with the Aideed's military wing, let alone responding to SNM's offer of a power-sharing arrangement, as articulated by a top senior member.²⁹ Thus, the USC was further polarised. The unilateral declaration of the Ali Mahdi presidency not only split the USC into two warring factions, it also alienated the other armed groups such as the SNM and the SPM (Ingiriis 2017).

Ali Mahdi was not someone well-known to the other armed opposition movements, though he was involved in the facilitation of the USC. He was a former member of the civilian democratic parliament (very briefly from May–October 1969) but was compelled by the Siad Barre regime to abscond politics and remain a businessman (*hôteleur*) during the period of the regime. Ali Mahdi was later one of the USC's financiers and a founding member of the economic wing of the movement along with such notable wealthy financiers, such as Haashi Weheliye Maalin and Mohamed Farah Jiis. Ironically, but

27. Interviews with the USC war veterans, Mogadishu, 9 July 2016.

28. Telephone interview with Engineer Ahmed Warsame Abtidoon, 25 December 2014; telephone interview with Dr. Ahmed Mohamed Darmaan, 2 July 2011; telephone interview with Ishaq Nuur Hassan, 25 December 2014.

29. Axmed M. Silyano (*sic*), "A Proposal to the Somali National Movement on a Framework for a Transitional Government in Somalia" (London, March 1991: 3). Copy on file with the author.

not unexpectedly, General Aideed refused to recognise the new president and declared a new war on the “self-appointed group.”³⁰ Many Somalis still wonder why the USC economic and political wings, as well as the Manifesto elders, selected Ali Mahdi as a president rather than the more charismatic Hawiye political actors. But it should be noted that, besides Ali Mahdi, the most important Hawiye political actors were either tainted or tarnished by their workings or collaborations with the Siad Barre regime.³¹ This was not unique to the USC, because the other movements, especially the SNM, also suffered a similar fate.³² These two cases were dissimilar in the sense that the SNM’s case culminated after Siad Barre in a *coup*-like political event over which the prominent case in point was the takeover of the SNM’s first administration by Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egaal and Daher Riyaale Kaahin, who opposed the SNM, but they nonetheless captured politically the power for which the movement fought (Ingiriis 2017).³³ No-one was able to come out of the post-Siad Barre Somalia unsullied; even the most charismatic Aideed had this defect of being soiled by his past collaboration with the former regime. After having working with Siad Barre for 13 years (from October 1975 until November 1989), he joined the USC during the end of this regime. Some prominent Hawiye leaders, who would later play a decisive role in the movement, also joined the USC late in the game, as late as January 1991 in the wake of Siad Barre’s fall and flight. This led some analysts to assume that the Hawiye “had played virtually no role in the anti-Barre struggle until a few months before his fall” (Makinda 1992: 31, 1993: 27). The painful reality was that no civilian member could have filled the void following Siad Barre’s ouster. There were no windows through which to envision better futures for Somalia in 1991,

30. Telephone interview with General Elmi Sahal Ali, 23 June 2014; telephone interview with Mohamed Goodah Barre, London, 6 July 2014; telephone interview with Mohamed Sheikh Mohamoud Guuleed “Ga’madheere,” 3 September 2014; telephone interview with Ahmed Mohamed Weheliye “Ahmed Hiji,” 29 August 2014; telephone interview with Sheikh Ali Haji Yusuf, 3 September 2014; *THE INDIAN OCEAN NEWSLETTER* (1991: 4).

31. Tainted potential names of an unending list were General Hussein Kulmiye Afrah, General Mohamed Ibrahim Ahmed “Liqliiqato,” General Mohamed Sheikh Osman, Abdullahi Ahmed Addow, Abdikassim Salaad Hassan, many of whom went underground to save their lives in 1991, albeit few had come to side with either Ali Mahdi or Aideed. Yet why Hussein Bood, who was more experienced than Ali Mahdi, was not selected president is still striking. “[K]ulan taariikhi ah MW Cali Mahdi, Dr Cabduqasim, Dr Cabdullahi Cadow, Isman M. Rooble & Shikh. C. Maxamud,” <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-GwY-EMBQK3I>>, (00:01-23:35), accessed 25 May 2019.

32. Interviews with SNM war veterans, Hargeysa, 14-16 July 2016.

33. In the end, Egaal welcomed the armed resistance movements by supporting their struggle in order to be part of the new political post-Siad Barre arrangement. See “Warqaddii Cigaal Qoray 1990kii,” *Xog-Ogaal*, Thursday 29 September 2011, p. 6.

only military mirrors reflecting Aideed with a powerful projection of himself as president. Yet before anyone contemplating assuming power changed his ideology and chose a new one, he had to reflect upon the past, meditate the present and predict the future. Prior to reconfiguring himself from ambassador to armed movement leader, Aideed had not justified his motivations for this change of mind to the USC civilian leadership and, most importantly, offered no self-criticism on how the failed politics of the Siad Barre regime might not be reverted to again in the future under his authority. The lack of such a critical re-evaluation contributed in crucial part to his political failure. "Failure," as James Ferguson (1990: 277) argues, "does not mean doing nothing; it means doing something else." Although Aideed, who was somewhat popular and more prominent than all his rivals, including his main arch rival Ali Mahdi, gained the upper hand militarily, he failed politically.³⁴ This was not because he believed in military might or only military to defeat his opponents like there would no political solution for Somalia until power is secured through blood, but he was committed to seizing power single-handedly. The crucial call from Ahmed Siilaanyo, the former SNM chairman, to the USC leaderships

34. As one Somali scholar put it: "Ali Mahdi is too weak and feckless to rule unruly Somalis. Clearly, [Aideed] was the man of the hour" (SAMATAR 1997: 126). In a recent research workshop at Addis Ababa University, Professor Medhane Taddese reiterated the perceptive precision that General Aideed could reconstitute a unified Somali state if given the chance by the international community (author's notes, Addis Ababa, 21 March 2016). In another research conference at the University of Oxford, an Oromo academic specialising in the Horn of Africa has pointed out that Aideed was the only Somali leader capable of pacifying Somalia in 1991 (author's notes, St Anthony's, Oxford, December 2014). These were observations also made by President Museveni, President Daniel arap Moi of Kenya, Libya's Colonel Mu'ammar al-Ghaddafi and the then UN Ambassador to Somalia Mohamed Sahnoun ("KeydMedia History Clips - General M. Farrah Aidid with Yoweri Museveni & Amb. Sahnoun - 1992," <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mwpY-bNqNYkk>>, (22:00–22:20), accessed on 2 June 2019, "General M. Farrah Aidid & Ambassador M. Sahnoun Speaking to the Somalis—1992," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjT_6WpBAPQ>, (00:17–18:57), accessed on 2 June 2019. Similar conclusions were also made by the erstwhile American Ambassador to Somalia Robert Oakley, his deputy John Hirsch and his top most senior military adviser General Anthony Zinni, as well as two distinguished American Professors Tom Farer and Harold Marcus, in addition to John Drysdale, a British scholar, who had consulted the post-colonial civilian Somali administration and the French specialist on Somalia Roland Marchal (CLANCY 2004; DRYSDALE 2001: chap. 2–3; FARER 1993; HIRSCH & OAKLEY 1995; MARCUS 1995; and my interview with Roland Marchal, by email, 13 January 2015). Similar empirical observations can also be drawn from conclusions generated not merely by Aideed's admirers but also by his adversaries. One of Siad Barre's grandsons, Siad Ahmed Saleebaan, the son of General Ahmed Saleebaan Dafle (Siad Barre's son-in-law), once confided to this author that he became disillusioned about Somalia the day Aideed died because he believed he would (re)unite Somalia again (author's notes, Brussels, March 2004).

in February 1991 to share power in a proportional, but peaceful, way was ignored by both Ali Mahdi and Aideed.³⁵

Aideed as the Main Challenger Within and Without

Of greater relevance to the imminent danger at hand was that during negotiations in June and July 1991, led by Hawiye elders to convince General Aideed to become the sole USC chairman, and put all three wings under his command, there was no progress made, even when all of them elected him almost unanimously in a landslide victory against Sheikh Ali Haji Yusuf. The election itself was an attempt aimed at distancing or distracting Aideed from his fixation on the post of the presidency claimed by Ali Mahdi. Elected with Aideed, perhaps with his instruction, were senior pilot Abdi Osman Farah “Abdi Qooreey,” as deputy USC chairman and Abdikarim Ahmed Ali as secretary-general. Spurred by this intra-Hawiye reconciliation, red bullets filled the sky on the evening of Aideed’s election at the Guuleed (Gurguurte) Hotel at which the USC supporters joyfully celebrated. They perceived, with some hope, that the newly-elected chairman would be content with his new power position and thus cooperate with the new president. This was never to be the case. By strengthening his desires and demands, the election instilled further ambition and excitement in him leading him to strive rather to seize the whole state for himself. Obstinate and overambitious as he was, Aideed always clung to his dream to follow in the footsteps of other African rebel leaders who became presidents after a military struggle.³⁶ What little expectation the Hotel Guuleed agreement had generated was soon dissipated.

Who was fooling whom between the two leaders? After a brief silence between July and September 1991, General Aideed renewed his stance that Ali Mahdi and his government were an illegitimate faction. Aideed became convinced that he was overwhelmingly elected by the ruling movement and cognisant that Ali Mahdi was merely selected by his economic associates. Although acrimonious rivals, Ali Mahdi was later compelled to offer Aideed the post of Defence Minister, an offer that Aideed turned down,³⁷ a point retrospectively confirmed by both former advisers of Ali Mahdi and Aideed.³⁸ The main issue was not, however, how power was to be shared, but who should

35. *op. cit.*, Silyano (*sic*), “A Proposal to the Somali National Movement.”

36. Interviews with the USC war veterans, Mogadishu, 9 July 2016.

37. Telephone interview with Ali Mahdi Mohamed, 15 June 2014.

38. Interview with Omar Salaad Elmi, email, 9 January 2015; interview with Abdulkadir Ya’kub Farah, Cardiff, UK, 18 September 2014.

share power with whom. Aideed would only allow Abdirahman Ahmed Ali “Tuur,” the then SNM chairman and Colonel Jees, the SPM chairman, as his deputies. As far back as October 1990, Aideed had made a pact with Tuur and Jees to form a united front against the Siad Barre regime and share power once it was ousted.³⁹

Which Way to Seize the State: Clan or Personal War?

Even if intended to ease the tension, the election of General Aideed as USC chairman created further fragmentation because it became a springboard for his bid for the presidency. He was able to reclaim more legitimacy, in this way, than was Ali Mahdi during this same period of time. Aideed’s senior adviser Ahmed Abdulle Qaawane reflected on this when he stated that the election was the “most legitimate” of all elections ever held in Somalia (*Africa Watch* 1992b: 4). This was evidence that the election did not help to diffuse the power rivalry. Wrestling over who should control Mogadishu fissured the USC into two violently hostile camps. At each other’s throat, Ali Mahdi’s faction came to be called the “Manifesto Group,” and Aideed’s faction as the “Mustahiil Group.” The war between Ali Mahdi and Aideed was also known as *Dagaalkii Afar-Biloodka* (The Battle of Four Months), and often framed as one between the Abgaal versus the Habar Gidir (their respective clans). It continued between November 1991 until March 1992, when the United Nations intervened.⁴⁰ Although there were no apparent religious, ethnic or ideological differences, people began to present the armed conflict as one clan versus another, rather than as a political conflict. Since in the Somali world, politics has been historically imbedded to revolve around clan, a clan connotation was given to the war. Many a scholar attributed a segmentary lineage system to the Somali clan structure and considered this the cause of the intra-USC fighting and fractionalisation (Lewis 1994; Samatar 1991a). It is easy to jump into the clan catalogue, but clan projections have often blurred as much as it bamboozled the context. That most Saleebaan/Habar Gidir, close cousins of Aideed’s Sa’ad/Habar Gidir, were with Ali Mahdi fighters disproves the clan reading of the conflict. The Saleebaan support

39. Interviews with the USC war veterans, Mogadishu, 9 July 2016.

40. Like the USC, the revival of the SSDF in early 1990s produced two competing leaders: General Mohamed Abshir Muuse, a long-time police commissioner of the post-colonial period, versus Colonel Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, a onetime SSDF military commander. See War-Torn Society Project, “Northeast Somalia, Regional Reports, Bari Region, Nugaal Region, North Mudug Region,” May 1998. Unpublished report in the possession of the author.

was antagonistically—even aggressively—expressed in support of the Ali Mahdi government, when their militiamen who were garrisoned at Radio Mogadishu denied Aideed access to use the radio to proclaim that he was the real president.⁴¹

While clan constitutes an important element (*e.g.* accumulation of resources and mobilisation of supporters), the war between Ali Mahdi and Aideed was not purely a clan or clanised war.⁴² Rather, it was a political rivalry, much more than a personal or clan issue. The crucial question was who had the right to inherit Siad Barre's presidency and thus sit the Villa Somalia and seize the state. This does not mean that the USC leaders had not possessed a clear socio-political programme beyond personal enrichment. While the heart of their contestation was political as well as economic, it was also infused with personal animosity. The fact that Ali Mahdi, an Agoonyar/Harti Abgaal/Abgaal/Hawiye and Aideed, a Reer Jalaf/Sa'ad/Habar Gidir/Hawiye, traded accusations at each other reinforced the impression that there had been prior personal rancour—in addition to clan resentment—between them. Besides or beyond clan issues, *Africa Watch* (1992b: 7) reported on a visiting delegation that observed “a deep personal animosity between the two leaders, who visibly detest[ed] each other.”⁴³ However, the fact was that Ali Mahdi and Aideed neither knew nor communicated with each other before January 1991. The oral testimonies provided by their close advisers that there was no personal issue in their war fly in the face of those who assumed that there was personal animosity. The political dimension was discounted: how the USC was formed in the first place with its strictly institutional charter designed ironically to prevent one single authoritarian leader from emerging. By setting up the framework with three autonomous yet opposing wings, the USC founders were fearful of the possible resurrection of the Siadist-type leader from their movement in post-Siad Barre's Somalia. As this was the case, the institutional attempt to balance power also set the stage for the internal power rivalries. Both Ali Mahdi and Aideed were more constrained by the USC institutional and organisational deficiencies than they would have been had the movement been constituted as a stable hierarchical organisation.

Political and economic considerations, an important element hitherto ignored in the analysis of the 1991 Somali conflicts, also loomed large in

41. Interviews with the USC war veterans, Mogadishu, 9 July 2016.

42. Somali society consists of the Dir, the Isaaq, the Hawiye, Digil-Mirifle and the Daarood. There are also countless other communities. Ali Mahdi and Aideed belonged to the Hawiye clan-group, though to different clans within it.

43. ROTHCHILD (1995: 67) also portrays the war as one among “personalities.” See also OMAAR (1992: 233).

the war. One must not lose sight of the fact that economic competition became more pronounced as the fighting peaked. With a mixture of anger and anxiety, the state was not so much a threat as a lucrative future asset for Ali Mahdi's camp. While he and most of his ministers lost their businesses (for example, Mahdi's Hotel Makka Al-Mukaramah was looted during the war), they were motivated by the expectation of seizing the state for future income. Likewise, General Aideed's financial backers, like Osman Hassan Ali "Aato," also anticipated unilaterally milking the state resources for compensation should they win the war.⁴⁴ Who should have the authority to control the income-generating revenues, such as the Mogadishu seaport, the biggest asset in the country? This was one of the main bones of contention. For Aideed and Ali Mahdi, controlling territories—even if unpopulated—was more important than ruling populations. This contrasts with the previous devotion by African rulers to strive to expand their rule to populations in terms of extortion (Herbst 2014). Moreover, the geopolitical factor in international relations was just as decisive as economic factors, even when other disputes over local political issues tended to blur it. In the primordial and instrumentalist views, there is little discussion of how international intervention contributed to the conflict. The USC oral testimonies bring to light that Ali Mahdi's and Aideed's armed confrontation was triggered when Italy promised Ali Mahdi that it would renew the flow of economic aid, which it used to provide for Siad Barre.⁴⁵ Seething with suspicion and wary of past Italian aid (not to mention American support), which had prolonged Siad Barre's reign for a decade or more, Aideed hurried to avert having the Italian government prop up Ali Mahdi.

Who Should Sit in Siad Barre's Seat?

As the above section illustrates, the fighting revolved around whose "time it was to eat," in other words, to conquer and devour the state.⁴⁶ It was through this reflection that one mediator, who got to know both Ali Mahdi and Aideed personally, called their rivalry "*damac shaqsi*" ("personal greed"), recalling that each wanted to grab something—which is to say, the state.⁴⁷ Aideed, apparently focused on his pursuit of power, followed a pure Clausewitzian strategy of power consolidation through the use of violence and force with the

44. Interviews with the USC war veterans, Mogadishu, 9 July 2016; *AFRICA WATCH* (1992b: 7).

45. Telephone interview with Ali Haashi Dhoorre, 1 August 2014; telephone interview with Colonel Omar Saleebaan, 25 December 2014.

46. The notion of "our time to eat" was well developed in BAYART (2013). See also BRANCH, CHEESEMAN & GARDNER (2010) and WRONG (2009).

47. Telephone interview with Colonel Omar Saleebaan, 25 December 2014.

stated objective of seizing the whole country. Bearing in mind the interweaving of statebuilding and violence, a Mudullood/Hawiye poet posed a legitimate question: “*Jelfiskii ka haray ina Siyaad, Jananku sow maahan?*” (“Isn’t the General one of the remnants of the Siad [Barre]?”). The poet went so far as alleging that Aideed belonged *not* to the Hawiye but to the Daarood, Siad Barre’s clan-group.⁴⁸ How else would a clan conscious Hawiye poet define him, when Aideed decided to finish off a government led by a fellow Hawiye and when the Abgaal and the Habar Gidir never fought among themselves before 1991? The fact that Ali Mahdi’s and Aideed’s was less a war between the two clans was empirically illustrated by testimonies from those who were on the ground as recorded in *Horn of Africa Bulletin* (1992: 2):

Many Somalis are opening their homes, and cupboards, to neighbo[u]rs when a nearby house is destroyed by random shelling. Such quiet sharing often extends across the lines of warring ethnic clans. “There are a lot of cases where members of the Abgal clan help the Habre-Gedir if they are neighbo[u]rs,” says Somali doctor Mohammed Dahir’.

It is estimated that close to 30,000 Hawiye people—more than those who died between the Hawiye versus the Daarood in 1991—were killed during the war from November 1991 until March 1992.⁴⁹ It lies beyond the scope of this article to offer an in-depth exploration of the magnitude of this warfare. It should be noted that this war was more dreadful than any other conflict within the armed opposition movements, even more deadly than the SNM infighting in northwest Somalia in the early 1990s (Ingiriis 2017).

With two nemeses like Ali Mahdi and Aideed, who would have needed foes? Whilst the internal USC mediators searched for solutions everywhere without success, a regional and even international mediation also proved to be futile. President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda tried to broker a peace mediation between Aideed and Ali Mahdi, while President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea also

48. Video available on *Subkane.flv*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I17qeaEIX8k>>, (min. 03:49 – 04:37), accessed on 9 September 2014.

49. It seems that *AFRICA WATCH* (1992a: 4) underestimates the number of deaths in this war in documenting that 14,000 people were killed. In another report from the same year, *Africa Watch* cited the ICRC field report which stated that 30,000 were killed (compare with *AFRICA WATCH* 1992b: 5). The latter report describes the war as “the most bloody and sustained” in the capital’s history (*ibid.*: 6). A diary of this war was produced by a journalist who was in the town and seems to have agreed on the findings of the last report (AFRAH 1993). The editor of the *Horn of Africa* journal also portrayed this as a war between “the unruly Hawiye mobs slaughtering one another in Mogadishu” (SAMATAR 1991b: 139).

sent a senior level delegation in January 1992.⁵⁰ Both efforts bore no fruits in even discarding the Green Line drawn between the territorial areas occupied by militias loyal to Ali Mahdi and Aideed. The UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali subsequently sent a mediation team to Mogadishu to reconcile the two leaders, resulting in a ceasefire signed in New York by two delegations representing Aideed and Ali Mahdi. Later, the American government also mediated between the two leaders who signed a peace agreement on 12 December 1992 (*Al-Hayat* 1992), but this post-Cold War goodwill, though it initially generated some positive results on a short-term basis, ended with failure on a long-term basis as were previous Eritrean, Ugandan and UN peace efforts.⁵¹ The Eritrean delegation commanded appreciation from both sides, but their inability to offer economic enticements and incentives to the warring parties in achieving peaceful settlement made their mission a futile attempt in the end (*Africa Watch* 1992b: 10).

General Aideed was, by all accounts, immensely infuriated by not being Siad Barre's successor, while Ali Mahdi, a much younger fellow, would not permit relinquishing power to him. Had he done so, Mahdi's presumption was that Aideed would have become sooner or later another dictator and so, as he was more charismatic and militarily experienced than Siad Barre, it would take another twenty years (or more) to oust him. A year before his death, Aideed made one last attempt to become president. After an eighteen-month conference, from November 1994 to July 1995 convened by his USC faction and its allied groups in the Somali National Alliance (SNA), he was declared president on 15 July 1995.⁵² His choice of Abdirahman Tuur, a Habar Yonis/Isaaq, his first vice president; Mohamed Haji Aden, a Majeerteen/Daarood, second vice president; Mohamed Nur Aliyow, a Digil-Mirifle, third vice president; Mohamed Farah Abdullahi "Hasharo," a Gadabirsi/Dir, fourth vice president; Hilowle Imaam Omar, an Abgaal/Hawiye, fifth vice president; and Abdirashid Nur, a Mareehaan/Daarood, sixth vice president, was less a broadening of political alliances than a political tactic to outmanoeuvre Ali Mahdi. With this new distribution of power, Aideed's government locally known as *Salbalaar* (broad-based) was somewhat more representative, but

50. Video, "Keydmedia History Clips—General M. Farrah Aidid with Yoweri Museveni & Amb. Sahnoun – 1992," <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mwpYbNqNYkk>>, (min 22:00-22:20), accessed on 5 August 2014.

51. See videos "Caydiid iyo Cali Mahdi 1' Hawlgalkii Rajo soo celinta," <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00sMoitZnoA>>, (min 00:10-02:40), accessed on 5 January 2015; "Cali Mahdi iyo Ceydiid," <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oA3od-0h0lo>>, (min 00:03-08:53), accessed on 5 January 2015.

52. "Xasuus Golahii Dowladii Salbalaar," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ITwRAcO_XU>, (min. 04:30-13:30), accessed on 4 August 2014.

less legitimate in the eyes of the international community, than Ali Mahdi's which had two vice presidents: Abdulkadir Zoppo, a Digil-Mirifle, first vice president; and Omar Mo'allim, an Ogaadeen/Daarood, second vice president, not to mention Omar Arte, a Habar Awal/Isaaq, as prime minister. Indeed, Aideed did not unify his militias around clan but created coalition-building politics in drawing various clan-groups into the SNA (Ingiriis 2016a). His armed contingents consisted of four main groups: Hawiye (represented by him), Daarood (represented by Colonel Jeess), Digil-Mirifle (represented by Colonel Mohamed Nur Aliyow) and Dir (represented by Colonel Abdi Warsame).

Despite Ali Mahdi and Aideed forming governments of their own, with each insisting on being the legitimate president, the USC ended up with two governments in Mogadishu, fighting to subdue one another, with the movement being used as a tool to ensure establishing a system of a modern-day *gouvernementalité* (governmentality), to use the concept as per M. Foucault (1991). Militarily, the largest movement was the Aideed faction which laid claim to most southern Somali territory, but economically, the most significant group was the Ali Mahdi faction. Whereas Ali Mahdi was influential economically and Aideed was powerful militarily, neither was so politically. Without sufficient political and economic resources at his disposal, Aideed could not seize the state unilaterally. While Ali Mahdi, representing the economic wing, was busy with resource extraction and Aideed, the military wing, preoccupied with accumulating arms, the USC invariably assumed a middle ground, as a non-aligned political wing, capable of acting as a pressure group in convincing both leaders to concede their powers to clan elders. A noteworthy example is how the SNM acted when it could not reconcile their internal power struggle (Ingiriis 2017). The very institutional superstructure of the USC shaped the way its politicians and personalities interacted and overwhelmed one another. In January 1989, with a political programme revised by the USC in Rome on the eve of its declaration, it was stated that the main objectives of the movement were: (1) to take over the rule from the Siad Barre regime; (2) to restore "Somali statehood and unity" and establish their foundations and (3) to reinstate democracy to the country.⁵³ This was a grand ambitious programme but did not forewarn of the imminent threats involved with ensuring these objectives. It was a combination of the institutional incongruity between the politics, the economics and the military that led the USC to fall and vanish.

53. United Somali Congress (USC) Political Programme; Handwritten letter by General Aideed; interview with General Aideed, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwC7nF-fHbK8>>, (min. 02:54-03:50), accessed on 29 December 2014; "Dowladii USC 1991," <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCHpPqOWvRg>>, (min. 1:11:52-1:20:50), accessed on 29 December 2014.

The End of the USC

Formed to face Siad Barre's state terror and clano-dictatorial injustices, the USC was but a conglomerate movement; all its leaders from different wings wanted to rule and seize the state for themselves, which led all of them to lose politically. As the USC struggle culminated in vain, their hard-earned achievement of ousting Siad Barre rarely received public recognition. In Mogadishu in the 1990s, at the height of the war, this author observed a conversation between two Somali merchant ladies in the open Bakaara market. The women were conversing over the contemporary political dynamics of the day. Upon appraising the emergence and re-emergence of multifarious armed movements, one told the other that the real name of the USC did not stand for U S C, but *Yuq-I-Sii* (swallow me up). The other lady subsequently concurred. What these ladies meant in their articulation of a new critical conceptualisation of the USC, one that was drawn from the viewpoint of the public whose majority had provided the support the movement required, was to highlight the fact that the USC succeeded in ousting the Siad Barre regime, but failed to offer a new stable democratic state that would restore peace and reinstate the rule of law. Given that the SNM later reconstituted Somaliland in May 1991, while the revived SSDF followed a similar trajectory of statebuilding by declaring Puntland in August 1998, the two ladies' harsh judgement was not wholly excessive as an assessment.⁵⁴ However, the 1991 wars must be understood as direct consequences of the legacies of the Siad Barre regime, which created structural conditions conducive to collapse. While it was not easy for them to disregard the structural barriers left behind by the Siad Barre regime as the SNM had done (Farah & Lewis 1997: 349-377), the USC could have done better to carefully adopt emergence measures of policing and disarmament.

The existing academic literature on Somalia lacks the perspectives of armed opposition movements which are key to understanding the state's collapse. In all accounts, the rivalries of the USC leaderships are understood in terms of personal or clan issues. Whereas popular and academic accounts focused on these aspects of the USC infighting, this article has suggested that the long historicity of the USC is essential to understanding Somali politics beyond clan politics. This is meant to direct our attention to the other interior and exterior aspects. Any analysis on African political conflicts hardly ignores "the personal variable" of the conflict (Médard 2012: 58); it is this variable that structures how political actors play upon the political systems, not to mention how the political game is itself played on the ground upon which

54. Somaliland and Puntland followed two different state-building trajectories.

institutional frameworks and formulas are imposed. Post-Siad Barre Somalia in 1991 required a leader who could reinstate peace and stability. In his memoir, General Aideed—the most ambitious of all of USC's leaders—formulated ideal designs to transition Somalia to peace and prosperity bolstered by democratic rule, but he found no chance to translate these apparently progressive ideas into action (Aideed 1994: 168-181; Aidid & Ruhela 1994; Ruhela 1994).⁵⁵ Although Aideed was undoubtedly proven to be a capable military man, he was unsuccessful as a politician and statesman. Aside from structural and other impediments, wrong policies fed by his close advisers diverted him from attaining his famously-devised vision of the “preferred future for Somalia” (Aidid & Ruhela 1994). When one strives for a positive and better outcome of an armed struggle for regime change, there must be one prerequisite: a strategic direction. Next should be considered the benefit of having a clearer hierarchical system of centralised organisational command. In this political context, the USC lacked both. The USC leaders knew nothing about the number of the USC fighters, whereas there was no other armed movement that could achieve a monopoly of violence. According to General Ahmed Jili'ow Addow, the USC militias in Mogadishu were restructured along sub-clan lines, and made up of both civilians and others who had defected from Siad Bare's army (Caddow 2001: 55).

The foundational structure of the USC set the stage for power competition. The USC's institutional system was based on a decentralised form of organisational leadership rather than an individual cult of personality. This was something the founders had obviously crafted to differ significantly from the Siad Barre regime's institutional one-man political party framework. For instance, the role of Ali Wardhiigley, the original USC leader, was not that dissimilar to the role of the other armed opposition movement leaders. Given that the USC had not produced a spiritual leader or a strong political figure even during its honeymoon days, the political asset for Ali Wardhiigley was that he had never worked for the Siad Barre regime, itself a credit considering the other competing USC leaders who had affiliated with or worked for the regime one

55. Interview with General Aideed, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwC7nFfHbK8>, (min. 02:54-03:50), accessed on 29 December 2014. General Aideed called on Aden Abdulle Osman “Aden Adde,” the first president of the Republic of Somalia, to attend his reconciliation conference (*HIMLO* 1995a: 3, 1995b: 3), a suggestion that he was seeking more legitimacy for his presidency.

way or another. While General Aideed later positioned himself as a powerful military leader because of his outstanding military expertise, Ali Wardhiigley was the most senior political actor within the USC establishment as a former minister (Ingiriis 2017). Be that as it may, the political performances of Aideed showed that he established a fighting force, but failed to form a stable unified state. If Aideed had concentrated his policies more on political bargaining rather than on the warfront, upon the Mogadishu takeover, the USC could have achieved a reconfigured state as did the RPF in Rwanda. In short, Aideed needed more than military might to pacify Somalia.⁵⁶ Articulations and expressions of grievances through military means can never be justified, even if Aideed's grievances were not confined to Siad Barre's era, but extended to the distribution of power in the civilian governments in the 1960s (Drysdale 2001). The grievous USC leaders quarrelled over power by turning their weapons on each other rather than competing through the polls. Eventually, a struggle compelled by a legitimate grievance took on the appearance of an unjustifiably illegitimate greed. The USC was expected to adopt political power-sharing, economic power-sharing and military power-sharing arrangements before any other step. The failure and demise of the USC were the consequences of waging violence with violence. Finally, the USC vanished the day Aideed died of gunshots on 1 August 1996. His death led to a situation where every man became his own Sultan in southern Somalia (Walker 1995). That his former USC deputy, Mohamed Qanyare Afrah, and his right-hand man, Osman Aato, each claimed to be the legitimate USC leader was indicative of how far the original ideals of the movement had disintegrated. Protracted years of "personal rule" (Jackson & Rosberg 1982) and "politics of the belly" (Bayart 2013) led to the continuation of the "big man politics" (Utas 2012).

In *Africa: Unity, Sovereignty & Sorrow*, the Belgian political scientist Pierre Englebert (2009: 13) has argued that "[m]ore often than not, authorities that might credibly challenge the state, such as chiefs or rebels, end up contributing to its reproduction." By focusing on the USC cogency(ies) and agency(ies), this article has assessed a crucial period of the Somali armed conflicts and examined the evolution and evaporation of the USC as well

56. Explaining Aideed's attempts at conquering the whole of Somalia, LULING (1997) wrote, after returning from a fieldwork in Mogadishu in the early 1990s, that Aideed was determined to unite the whole of Somalia to become its ruler through military means. As she put it: "This was Caydiid's method perhaps one he saw as compelled by the supreme need to unite the country" (*ibid.*: 299). Said Samatar, a Somali scholar who long opposed to Aideed, came to the similar conclusion—upon renouncing his earlier position on Aideed in an interview conducted in Somali language—that Aideed had encountered a clan burden that Meles Zenawi and other armed rebel leaders in the Horn of Africa had not experienced (<http://www.wardheernews.com>, accessed on 9 January 2015).

as its institutional structures and divergent leadership styles. Due to space constraints, the focus has centred on the political and practical aspects of the USC and detailed the USC grievances that arose from pre-1991 Somalia as well as the greed that emerged from the political victory of post-1991. If Collier and Hoeffler (2004: 563-595) have excluded other salient factors, other than the economic aspect, the emphasis of this article has instead pointed to the relevance of the politics of power and political economy, the anthropology of war and the sociology of conflict in post-authoritarian regimes. It emphasised that purely economic analysis pursuing economic trends could hardly be understood, given the complicated armed conflicts. The Somali case has shown that, to wrest economic dominance, one had first to capture political power through military might. Further research on many other aspects, notably the political economy, the poetic combat and most important of all, how foreign diplomats in Somalia aggravated the USC conflicts, would add to our understanding of what went wrong with Somalia in 1991. More specifically, the role Italians played in this polarisation also warrants closer examination.⁵⁷ Up until now, the opposing internal and external groups in Somalia “cannot agree on how to distribute power among [Somali] elites, clans, and factions” (Duffield 2013: 21; see also Human Rights Watch 1995). Where Somalis could go from here is an open-ended question. Crucially, the bedrock of the Somali conflicts—both internal dynamics and external dimensions—warrants further research exploration to illuminate their causes, consequences and continuation.

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57. The Somali scholar H. ADAM (1992: 20) wrote that the minute Siad Barre fled Mogadishu, the Italian Ambassador Mario Sica provided a destructive advice to Ali Mahdi to proclaim himself president before General Aideed claimed the position for himself.

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ABSTRACT

In the existing academic literature on Somalia, the armed opposition movements that emerged at the height of the Cold War are treated as unidirectional and uniform. This article challenges this tendency by tracing the emergence and evaporation of the once popular mass armed opposition movement, the United Somali Congress (USC). The article provides comparisons with the experiences of Somali and other regional armed opposition movements to argue for a case of institutional and organisational faults in the USC. Most armed movements across the African continent became successful in overthrowing authoritarian regimes during the end of the Cold War, but few of them succeeded in their attempts to seize state power. Unlike the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in Ethiopia in May 1991, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in Rwanda in April 1994 and, a bit earlier, the National Resistance Army (NRA) in Uganda in January 1986, the USC leadership in January 1991 failed to form a stable state and, instead, turned their weapons on each other. Why did the USC fail in 1991 to reconstitute the state which it had fought to rule? What was the power configuration of the USC? How did power contestation of the movement, from the outset, set the stage for chronic conflicts? In seeking answers to these questions, the article explores the internal USC political dynamics by utilising extensive oral interviews with key figures (players, protagonists, proponents and political brokers), visual sources, intelligence reports and the movement's pamphlets.

Keywords: Somalia, Ali Mahdi, General Aideed, armed opposition groups, infighting, power struggles, United Somali Congress (USC).

RÉSUMÉ

Amertume et avidité en Somalie. La formation, l'échec et la chute de l'United Somali Congress (USC). — Dans la littérature scientifique sur la Somalie, les mouvements armés d'opposition qui émergent pendant l'apogée de la Guerre froide sont traités de manière uniforme et unidirectionnelle. Cet article défie cette tendance en retraçant l'émergence et la disparition d'un mouvement populaire de masse, le United Somali Congress (USC). Cet article fournit des comparaisons avec les expériences d'autres mouvements armés d'opposition somaliens et ceux d'autres régions afin de pointer les défauts organisationnels et institutionnels au sein de l'USC. La plupart des mouvements armés sur le continent africain sont parvenus à renverser des régimes autoritaires pendant la fin de la Guerre froide, mais certains ont aussi réussi leur tentative de s'emparer du pouvoir d'État. Contrairement à l'Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) en Éthiopie en mai 1991, le Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) en avril 1994 et, auparavant, la National Resistance Army (NRA) en Uganda en janvier 1986, les dirigeants de l'USC en janvier 1991 échouent dans leur tentative de former un État stable et vont jusqu'à prendre les armes les uns contre les autres. Pourquoi l'USC a échoué en 1991 à reconstituer un État qu'il avait combattu pour gouverner à sa place ? Quelle était la configuration de pouvoirs au sein de l'USC ? Comment la contestation à l'intérieur du mouvement, dès le début, a entraîné des conflits chroniques ? Cet article explore la dynamique politique interne de l'USC en s'appuyant sur des entretiens avec des personnages clés (acteurs, protagonistes, promoteurs et négociateurs politiques), des sources visuelles, des rapports des services d'intelligence ainsi que de la propagande imprimée du mouvement.

Mots-clés : Somalie, Ali Mahdi, Général Aideed, groupes armés d'opposition, luttes internes, luttes de pouvoir, United Somali Congress (USC).