

The role of Somaliland elders in making and keeping peace

a conversation with Hajji Abdi Hussein Yusuf

Haji Abdi Hussein Yusuf 'Abdi Warabe' is one of the oldest and well known genuine traditional leaders in Somaliland. He is the second deputy chair of the Elders House (*Guurti*) of the Somaliland bi-cameral parliament. He is known for his tough positions and strong voice in both traditional conflict resolution issues and peacebuilding and political challenges. He was one of the few elders who were instrumental in the 1993 Borame conference where the successful social contract was agreed among the Somaliland clans and from there the Somaliland Administration was given a solid basis to take incremental growth to date. His traditional title is 'chief Aqil'.



Haji Abdi attending the 10th anniversary celebrations of the establishment of the Academy for Peace and Development in Hargeisa, Somaliland, 12 October 2008. © APD

On 18 May 1991, a few months after the collapse of the Siyad Barre regime, the Somali National Movement (SNM) declared the people of the northern regions were ceding from Somalia to form the Republic of Somaliland. Over the next three years, clan elders steered the new state through a series of reconciliation conferences that laid the basis for the stability that exists in Somaliland today. This interview with Hajji Abdi Hussein, a prominent Somaliland elder, explores his role in peacemaking and unifying a divided society.

How and when did you become an elder? What was the process of nomination and how it was conducted?

My elder brother passed away in 1940 and I was nominated by our clan as his successor. This followed the Somali tradition that when either your father or your elder brother passes away, you will be nominated as his successor by clan elders.

I initially refused the offer and only accepted once the clan agreed to three conditions: to protect and keep the peace; to abide by the government's rulings; and not to be envious or jealous of what other clans have. I was consequently inaugurated as the chief (*aqal*) of my sub-clan.

What was your role during the insurgency against the regime of Siyad Barre?

During the war, I retreated to a small village in Ethiopia, from where I was active in gathering together elders, military leaders and sheikhs, to discuss the future of the SNM.

One of the disputes I helped to resolve was the transfer of power from one chairman of the SNM to another. This change of leadership was instrumental in restoring the strength and unity of the movement and averting a potential conflict among its members. Later on I was involved in the transfer of power from the SNM military leaders to the Somaliland council of elders (*Guurti*), which enabled Somaliland's traditional elders to play a role in building peace and coexistence among Somaliland's clans.

What was the specific role that you played in the Somaliland inter-clan reconciliation process?

After the SNM defeated Siyad Barre I returned to Somaliland and worked with other elders to defuse conflicts between different clans. I played a leading part in the various Somaliland national reconciliation conferences, which discussed the future of Somaliland and how to incorporate people from clans that had previously supported the Barre regime. These issues were ultimately resolved through dialogue.

During the insurgency I had argued that if the SNM proved successful, it should accommodate clans who supported the former government. This policy has been followed. It has maintained the unity of Somalilanders, fostered trust among people, and defused inter-clan conflict. It has enabled us to establish a central government and parliament that could represent the entire people of Somaliland.

What is the role of the *Guurti* in conflict resolution?

The main role of the council of elders has been to maintain peace. They have been able to resolve conflicts in ways that are familiar to them and to avoid military intervention. Somali culture provides that elders are representatives of the clans. They speak on behalf of their clan and also have full authority to make decisions on its behalf. They have enormous power that they can exert on two conflicting parties.

Have you played a role in the statebuilding process?

During the 1993 Borama National Reconciliation Conference, where the Somaliland clans came together to decide upon the future system of government, I was involved in discussions on deciding what political systems we should adopt.

I suggested that the best political structure is the presidential system. I argued the presidential system had three advantages for the peace and security of the country. Firstly, a directly elected president would not create tension among the clans. Secondly, the president needed to be given full power in order to maintain a strong and effective central government. And finally, the president could only be removed from office through an impeachment process and not by violent means.

During the Borama Conference it was agreed that the government must draft a constitution to make Somaliland a constitutional democracy. Have you played a role during the democratization process of Somaliland?

After adopting a presidential system, the interim government began drafting a national constitution, which would provide a baseline for the peace and stability of Somaliland. This took a long time. During the constitution-making process I helped to resolve disputes between the executive and the legislature on the adoption of the constitution. This was achieved through compromise, dialogue and a vision to rebuild the country together.

What was your role in the institutionalization of the *Guurti*?

On my return to Somaliland I had helped to establish an informal group of the *Guurti* to help defuse conflicts. At the Borama conference, I lobbied for the *Guurti* to be incorporated into the new political system. This enabled us to preserve the traditional methods of managing conflict for use when new conflicts arise. In this way we played a crucial role in the institutionalization of the *Guurti*.

Why have internationally sponsored national peace conferences for Somalia failed?

During the colonial era, southern Somalia was colonized by Italy, which destroyed the traditional conflict management systems, rendering the elders ineffective. So their role in conflict management and peacebuilding disappeared.

But Somaliland, which was colonized by Britain, kept its own traditional conflict management mechanisms in place and these values and norms were not disrupted. These have ultimately enabled us to reconcile our people and have nurtured mutual trust and dialogue.

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Interview by Mohamed Farah, the Academy for Peace and Development.