

A case study on warlordism in africa history essay



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Warlordism has appeared in many states and cultures in history. Currently there are two countries, in which warlords play an important role - these are Afghanistan and Somalia. In my paper I will try to describe this form of ruling in a case of Somalia - what have warlords brought to common people, how have they affected their lives and possibly how may their future look like.

Warlordism is known as the prevailing form of political organization in the south-central regions after the fall of Siad Barre's regime in the early 1990s. Warlords, the leaders of Somali newly emerged political factions, begun to play an important role mainly after the fall of Siad Barre's regime in 1991. These powerful men, who base their support mainly on clan identification, changed the country of Somalia a lot when they were pursuing their own ambitions. The main goal of my work is therefore finding the answers to these questions - what caused warlordism to rise in Somalia, what happened during their rule in the 1990s and what impacts have had warlordism on this country.

For better lucidity, I divided my seminar work into four major chapters.

The first chapter is rather theoretical - it explains the meaning and origin of the word „ warlord” and it tries to offer some exact definition of „ warlordism”.

The following part of my paper seeks an explanation of why has warlordism become such a significant phenomenon of Somalia, where lie its roots and it also reminds of the role of Siad Barre in Somali history. It describes the rise of warlords and also their gradual fall during the second half of the 1990s.

For better understanding, I added two subchapters - the first is about clans

in Somalia and the second one takes a closer look on how the situation looks like in different Somali regions.

The third chapter examines the impacts of warlordism on common life of Somalis, what was their contribution to Somalis after the year 1991. Again, two subchapter were added. The first subchapter explains, where warlords gain their resources for maintaining warfare and keeping their rule; it also offers somewhat interesting conclusions of researchers from the World Bank about Somali economy and Somalis themselves. The second subchapter tells about rather sad remains of Barre's regime - about militarization of society.

The last chapter takes a brief look on the way how have warlordism and civil war changed the role of a woman in Somali society. It shows that in spite of their inferior situation, they still carry on some important function in common life of Somalis.

1 A definition of warlordism

Warlord is a person who controls a specific area of his country with military forces that are loyal to him and not to a central government. He uses his power beyond his legitimacy, often thinking that war is the only way of ruling. By doing this, he differs from a feudal, who has also military power, however he still stays loyal to a central government (or leader).

This word (warlord) comes from the German word „Kriegsherr“, that has similar meaning. Even Germans use nowadays the English term instead of their own.[1]

Warlordism is therefore a form of ruling by warlords and can be described above all in so called failed states. Generally, in these states there is either no central government or authority, or this government has lost its control over the country. According to Anderson, most of the failed states share these three characteristic features: „ Firstly, the central government has effectively lost control and authority over the territory. Secondly, internal violent conflict is - or has recently been - rampant. Thirdly, the level of human suffering is appalling. Extreme poverty and hunger are widespread and growing. Atrocities are being committed. Human rights grossly violated and otherwise curable diseases turn into epidemics.”[2].

The Fund for Peace creates every year so-called Failed States Index, which mixes social, economic and political indicators. For the year 2009, 38 countries - most of them from Africa - were classified as „ alert”. The highest index level was assigned to Somalia (114, 7)[3]. In a specific case of Somalia, we can therefore speak not only about a failed state, but many scientists and journalists describe it as a collapsed one. It means lack of state institutions and state coercive powers who cannot offer public services anymore.[4]

If we would like to be more precise at the description and origin of warlordism, there can be found four major characteristics:

- 1) Rule over a small part of country is overtaken by trained and armed man, who make use of instability of a central authority
- 2) These men seek their own self-interest, not a public favour

3) Legitimacy of warlords comes from their personal charisma and the devotion of followers

4) Because of their self-interest, country is divided into small political and economical sections, free trade is disrupted, therefore economy is slowing and foreign investors do not wish their capital to be part of this territory.[5]

Examples of this system can be found in many countries. It appeared and appears in Afghanistan, Iraq, Burma, Chechnya, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Pakistan. In this paper, I will describe the current situation in Somalia.

2 The origin and progress of warlordism in Somalia

The beginnings of warlordism in Somalia can be observed after a coup d'état in 1969, when general Siad Barré took control over the country. He rewarded well those were loyal to him, to his clan, but with the help of bribes, gossip and intrigues, he managed to fragment other factions (which were supposed to get weaker) – this tactic is described as divide-and-rule. Domestic resources and foreign aid were not used for development, rather for rewarding Barres loyal clans and their military leaders and to punish disloyal ones. This brought a massive instability, causing armed oppositionist clans to rise against Barres regime, first in the northeast region, and then in the northwestern, southern and central regions – all except the territory ruled by Barre. Combined with rather disastrous result of the war with Ethiopia, Barre started to lose control and other factions began strengthening their positions. It resulted into civil war, where Siad Barré was overthrown and anarchy again reigned this country. Cause of the Somali civil war is not only

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clan system, but the roots lie in wrong distribution of resources and power, long-lasting corruption, exploitation, despotic regime and wrong development. All these elements mixed together caused what we saw in the first half of the 90s in Somalia.

The loss of war with Ogaden gave a birth to new political factions. People from the Majerteen sub-clan of the Darod established the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), operating in central Somalia, while the Isaaq clan took control over the north, under the name of Somali National Movement (SNM). The last important faction, emerged during the reign of Siad Barre, was the United Somali Congress, consisting of the biggest clan of the Hawiye, and occupied central-south Somalia. At the time of Barre's fall, there was about 15 political factions in Somalia. A year later, major centres were occupied by the four strongest warlords. While Mogadishu was divided into two parts between Aidid and Ali Mahdi, Mohamed Said Hersi controlled Bardaro and the port of Kismaayo was under the rule of Ahmed Omar Jess. All four fought strongly among themselves, bloody fights occurred especially between the two leaders of Mogadishu.[6]

Therefore we can say that former clans emerged now as political factions with warlords in their lead and these factions often crossed clan lines. What was also broken and missing, was the Xeer law.[7]Regrettably after the collapse of regime, warlords were not able to unify, to maintain central government with warlords in its lead. They could have governed the whole country, but they were unable to make an agreement, so all that remained was shattered country with relatively small territories, controlled by military leader. Militias were not struggling for taking place in government; the war

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simply degenerated in anarchy and banditry. The only exceptions rised in the north, forming Somaliland and Puntland.

Fights among the leaders for remaining resources and for strategic points (harbours, airports, major cities etc.) brought great havoc to this country and because farmers were not able to work on their fields due to persisting warfare, hunger spread quickly among inhabitants. The result of their warfare was also spread of armaments, the nearly complete destruction of the capital of Mogadishu, plundering of almost all public goods and state properties, fleeing of almost one million of Somalis abroad and separation of at first Somaliland, and than Puntland in the north. The civil war destroyed almost all state institutions, the social and economic infrastructure and broke all food supplies, both from internal and external sources.

Boundaries of traditional clan territories have quite changed since the start of civil war. Weaker clans have been driven out of their homeland, while stronger ones took their positions. The raids were targeted at profitable areas (rich agriculture lands, ports, cities etc.) and locals often fled because of violence that is brought by attacking warlords. It is also an example of Puntland, from which many people have fled through Yemen to Australia, America or Scandinavia.[8]

The main interest of rising warlords was prolonging of statelessness, as their crimes agains locals errupted massive stolen property, unresolved property disputes and occupied territory.[9]It were not only warlords, who had an interest on prolonging of civil war and anarchy. Also some businessmen voted strongly against a rebuilding of government, as a new administrative

could easily see through their business and cut their gains from illegal trade to minimum

Since 1995, conflicts have changed a lot in Somalia. From a large-scale warfare between clans that plagued the whole country to only local conflicts between sub-clans began to emerge. These conflicts had much less duration and were also not so bloody, as only few people were involved.

There are several reasons for this change – clan elders gained much more authority, also warlords have finally secured their regions and also have less resources to buy means of war – weapons and ammunition. The biggest incentive gave however Somalis themselves – people became finally fed-up with their tyranny, especially businessmen, who refused to pay any fees and taxes just for passing through warlord operated territories. Therefore they hired Islamists militias, who represented a formidable threat to warlords. Islamic radicals quickly restricted warlords rule. The real power had only those warlords controlling strategic places (like ports, cities, airports) or those in high positions (members of the government etc.) Meanwhile, businessmen formed their own private security forces to guard their property – since the new government was unable to do that; these private forces are ranked among the most powerful in Mogadishu.

Although crimes of warlords are decreasing in progress, white collars are beginning to represent a new threat to Somali stability, since their increasing counterfeiting of currency, which strongly undermines Somali economy.[10]

2. 1 Clannism in Somalia

Clans are basic units of society in Somalia throughout its history. Yet their role has somewhat changed in last years, especially after the accession to power by Siad Barre.

First I would like to characterize a Somali clan. Clan identity is not fixed here, and is subject to change. Warlord maipulates people to gain their loaylty to achieve his goals, (where they are political, territorial, economic or military). However, it does not mean that the members of clans change their membership constantly every day. It happens only when see that someone else can offer them better conditions. A few points can be observed about the changes of clans and clan identities in Somalia:

a) traditionally, clans served more like mediators, their purpose was to bring peace and stability to the country, also shifting of clan identities was not so often. This was changed during the rule of Siad Barre, when clan leaders manipulate other followers to acquire their goals, and this shifting of clan identities became a primary source of conflicts (not clans themselves.

b) in the beginnings of Somali civil war, conflicts occured especially between major clans. In progress, conflicts became more and more localized, even between the leaders of the same clan (fights between subclans andeven between sub-subclans), like it happened for example in Somaliland - eventhough they gained some independence, new clashes emerged inside ruling Isaaqs clan.

As I mentioned, the primary source of conflicts are shifting clan identities. But it it also true that clans are main and probably the only way how to bring peace to Somalia, as they it was in past Somalia. Legitimacy of clan elders

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and of traditional customary law (xeer) could be the sources of cooperation and reconciliation. „ A clan in Somalia is a double-edged sword - it closely links Somalis and tears them apart"[11].

2.2 Divided country

The following lines describe the differences between the main Somalia region.

From 1991, many formal, self-declared administrations have arisen. We can distinguish between these four types - transregional, regional, district and municipal. Examples of transregional and regional entities can be found obviously in Somaliland and Puntland. The problem is that although they provide some basic functions, they do not possess the marks of an internationally recognized sovereign state like issuing of passports and so on.

But not only these two have tried to gain some autonomy - the Rahanweyn Resistance Army's administration of Bay and Bakool regions in 1998-2002 and the Benadir Regional Authority in 1996[12]. These territories are often formed on clan homelands or former colonies, like Puntland, which is situated on the territory of the Harti clans, or Somaliland, the place of the former British colony. Warlords could therefore build a new state by adding existing blocks together. There is however another clash - between centralists and federalists. Centralists fear that a divided state will become much weaker and will offer an opportunity to neighbouring countries to slowly appropriate separated territories, while federalists are mainly those,

who don't have any representatives in government and fear that the TFG could take too much from them.

There is a strong regional diversity in Somalia - from the relatively peaceful and secure provinces in the north to the war-torn territories in the south. Rich lands of southern region, ports and access to sea are the sources of conflict that still prevails in this part of Somali country.

The Lower Shabelle region doesn't seem to form some regional authority, as clashes between various factions and warlords over rich agriculture and marine resources still continue. On the other hand, the Middle Shabelle region proves to be relatively stable in recent years thanks to newly formed administration.

Other clashes continued to torment the Lower Jubba region, especially those around the port of Kismaayo. The winner of factions wars was the clan Juba Valley Authority, which holds a relatively strong position over this territory. Neighboring Middle Jubba and Gedo regions also lack some strong authorities; the Gedo region must in addition face attacks from Ethiopian soldiers, who are trying to pacify local Islamic groups.

The regions of Mudug, Galgaduud and Hiraaan in the northwest of Mogadishu officially claim some authority, but de facto have none. They provide no basic functions, have no authority or legitimacy to govern. Security is provided by traditional leaders and Islamic courts, to some extent.

In opposite to the southern and the central regions, the north-east and west territories have succeeded in forming stable and secure provinces without

significant violent conflicts. Even administrative organs and state institutions appear here, providing some basic functions. Somaliland, occupying the north-west part, formed on boundaries of the former British colony in 1991. Despite two minor civil conflicts in 1992 and 1994, it has created its own bicameral parliament, judiciary, police force and municipal structures, also elections are regularly held.

Somaliland was followed by Puntland in the north-east eight years later. Similar to Somaliland, Puntland also faced internal conflicts from 2001-2003 concerning constitutional crisis, but those two were solved peacefully. Like in Somaliland, peace and security has attracted some foreign investment and NGOs, however in a smaller quantity compared to its western neighbour.[13]

3 The impacts of warlords' rule

In a case of Somalia, we can say that the absence of state authority or defined state borders is not an essential problem for this country. Most African states gained their independence almost overnight, which brought many problems. Examples may be ethnic conflicts as a result of arbitrary boundaries, weak institutional system full of corruption and bureaucracy, weak links between state and civil society or monocrop economy too dependent on exports[14]. Also most African people have had bad experience with both colonists and post-colonial leaders, who have often cruelly exploited them and used state institutions and state power only for their personal profit. No wonder why many Africans rather do not believe „modern systems“ of free market and liberal democracy. For a long time, they had their own system of organization that worked well. If we describe

anarchy as a system without a central government, than in Somalia lasted anarchy all the time, before colonists arrived (the difference between anarchy past and present is that in pre-colonial era, round ½ of population was not dying or being in danger of dying because of hunger, as it happened in 1992[15]). Families, clans, tribes and villages had their own rules and traditions, with which their could prosper relatively good. They also had their own leader. Would it be so bad, if that leader became a warlord?

Somali experience answers us the question - yes, it would. As much as order within clans or tribes is well-kept, people still need basic functions of state to be organised. They need to have their rights protected, their basic needs to be satisfied. Property rights, security, infrastructure, electricity, schools, health-care or (for common people not so important) some political representation; these things have to exist in case a state wants to be successful and prosperous these days. If warlords took care of this, it would have been no problem. However, warlords in Somalia have not been able to secure these things, they have cared rather about their personal gains while exploiting this already poor country and fighting for remaining resources, than about people needs. That's why we can say that warlordism have affected the country of Somalia quite negatively, it has spreaded fear and hate among civilians and was profitable only for those who were loyal and close to the warlords. Warfare brought among civilians was terrible. The Lower Jubba region was affected by far the worst. To maintain the patronize system and to acquire more weapons, warlords needed money. They gained financial resources by selling livestock and agricultural products of locals, later even that of foreign food aid. Rural inhabitants were terrorized almost

instantly after Barre was overthrown. „ Destruction was systematic, wells, ponds, grain stores, seeds and livestock consumed, carried off, killed or destroyed”.[16]

Because of many refugees, who were forced to flee the country and settle in abroad, we can say that warlords are responsible for Somali diaspora, which have affected many Somali lives till nowadays. Somalia is highly dependent on remittance and for many people it is the only way how to survive (remittances make up about 825 mil. USD in 2004, which is about 60 % of GNP[17]). Warlords have also prevented people from reaching basic state functions - healthcare, education, infrastructure and so on. Especially education, which is important everywhere and everytime, was signifacantly missing, as new young people can help their country, at least by describing and understanding what is happening there, so the foreigners could better comprehend what is going on.

Furthermore, not only that warlordism doesn't help locals, it also keeps off foreign countries from helping. Risky environment full of chaos will probably not attract foreign investors. Foreign aid is stolen by the warlords, and those delivering it are kidnapped or attacked.[18]Under these circumstances, only few countries are willing to help such countries, whether with humanitarian, development or military aid. Especially in case of Somalia, after the debacle of the US and the UN forces in 1993, the Western states consider twice before they send some troops to these regions.

To summ up, no matter how bad experience have Somalis with autocrative regimes, a creation of some state authority still looks better that status-quo.

Stronger government (without warlords in its lead) with control over the country seems to be at least some solution to current problems.

Furthermore, except of breaking internal security, warlordism also threatens neighbouring countries. Collapsed Somalia, without a well-guarded border, is ideal for smugglers, illegal trade of weapons and drugs. In addition, unstable environment will surely attract those who need to be hidden - radicals, extremists, terrorists. Somalia is a great example, as after reclaiming the power by Islamic Union Courts in 2006, some highly-sought terrorists from al-Qaida appeared in these territories. Which attracted a major enemy of terrorists, the government of the United States, and the US Army began consequently airstriking suspicious villages in the south region, where terrorists were hiding. However, the US did not well in this case, as they supported enemies of UIC - warlords, who on the contrary used these resources to gain more power, so they could continue with exploiting Somali inhabitants. Not a good idea from the US, I would say.

3. 1 Economic consequences of warlordism

To maintain disorder and to keep their power, warlords need money. The main sources of their income are money they receive from foreign sponsors, from taxes and charges levied on trade routes, ports, airports or in big cities or even on some sections of road, or, there have been attempts to use counterfeit Somali currency, which was printed abroad. Another problem of Somalia is qat (khat), a flowering plant with cathinone alkaloid, which is a stimulant causing excitement, loss of appetite and euphoria. The WHO considers this plant as a drug of abuse[19]. Since Islam forbids Somalis

drinking alcohol, they chew this plant to have at least some feelings of intoxication. Similar to the Czech people, who meet in pubs and drink beer, Somalis meet in a place called „ mefrish“, where they chew en mass[20]. Not only that workers are of course less effective while being drugged; what is more important is the fact that the distribution of khat is nearly entirely controlled by warlords, who gain huge profits from the drug trade and they use these revenues to acquire more weapons and other means of warfare and therefore more power.

Conflicts between warlords also caused massive economic problems. Except of human casualties - number of people who were killed by war and disease, who were never born or who emigrated is estimated about 2 millions, there is also a great poverty, by which is affected about 43 percent of population Moreover, Somalia finds itself at the bottom of the most African (and worlds) economic rankings. Also its external debt has increased a lot from the beginning of civil (2 billion USD) to nowadays (about 3, 2 billion USD)[21]. Nevertheless, trade was not so affected by warfare and private sector adapted very quickly on the lack of state institutions. When Saudis placed a ban on livestock (mainly sheep and goats), they simply direct their trade elsewhere. This example shows us another characteristic feature of Somalis - their resilience. As I said, many Somali economic indicators lie even behind the world's poorest countries. Yet we should mention that these data do not vary so much from those of pre-civil war this shows us high resilience of Somali people, who could adapt to very difficult conditions. Moreover, state collapse brought to Somalia what even structural adjustment programmes could not - privatization and liberalization of economy and of all public

services - water, electricity or security; especially telecommunication system have developed quite well so far.[22]It shows us, that Somalia was not unified politically, economic integration of Somali regions went on well through free flow of goods, services and informations. Economy is able to develop itself, although foreign aid is either missing (after the debacle of UN forces in 1993-1994) or being looted by warlords.

Trade has to face some difficulties here though, as important markets placed in major cities have become too dangerous and risky for trading as a result of warfare. So traders need to operate on different trade routes. Also some states, especially from Arabian peninsula, refuse to do business with Somalis, as there are no veterinary controls. Menkhaus[23]appoints however, that the demand of Somali merchants for new roads a trading routes, so they could trade more easily and safely, is one of the primary causes of incurred peace processes and peace talks. Furthermore, it is an argument for weakening position of warlordism. Without warlord rule, traders have better opporunities. If country is secured, if merchants can do their business without a fear of being kidnapped or robbed, if veterinary regulations are instituted, than trade is flourishing and commonweal is incresing.

A conclusion of the World Bank research says that Somali war has its main roots neither in a warfare between clans nor in the Cold war, but in a policy of Siad Barre, who shifted from command economy to free market and economic liberalization, while still relying on the power of his own clan and fomenting rivalry between other clans. Consequences of these actions were

not immediate, however in the future they have proved to have a devastating effect on Somalia.

3. 2 Militarization of society

A significant feature of Siad Barre's regime (and consequently of warlordism) is a culture of militarization, something that have lasted to these days.

Barre's institutions had but a little legitimacy, law was rather forced by military means. After the coup in 1991, weapons could be found almost in every family, metaphorically spoken. Weapons have been used to settle quarrels between people and have even been traded on open markets. To make conditions even worse, several observes spotted that some Somali warlords are supported from the neighbouring countries, who don't seek a peaceful solution, but their own goals and interests. Main actors are Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Yemen, who deliver their weapon-cargos though ports in Boosaaso, Marha and Kismaayo[24]. This was a serious problem for warlords, as they slowly started to lose control over their followers, as well as clan elders has lost much of their authority. Law was a one big unknown. Since any accountability could be seen and impunity became common in Somalia, situation got worse very quickly. (warlords were oppressing locals, using them as a forced labour or driven them out).

Without any state authority, a real power lied in the hands of those who were armed - militiamen, their leaders and young men, who sought in war their own profit (these men were often rather children, as some observes estimate that about 200 000 (5 %) of Somali children had been involved in militia activities).[25]

Weapons that warlords demand and with which they fight are usually following – low-cost assault rifles, pistols, hand grenades, rocket propelled grenades, mortars, heavy and medium machine guns and anti-aircraft cannons deployed in a ground-attack role. However, warlords commonly do not interfere directly with weapon traders, they rather authorize someone else to acquire merchandise for them.

Luckily, in the past several years, clashes between clan-leaders and locals are not so frequent, but still most people keep their weapons, because they fear for their property and for their lives. This applies especially for south-central Somalia, the region without any form of effective and strong government. On the other hand, Somaliland and Puntland have made a significant progress in demobilization, as their leaders know that without