



See you in **Mogadishu**

INTERVIEW

with **Mohamed Aden Sheikh**

by * **Anna Mays, Francesco Candelari, Nicola Filizola**

It was the month of November 1991. Mohamed Aden Sheikh, one of the most versatile Somali men and former representative of the Somali government, was publishing his first book in a Western country. “See you in Mogadishu”, a book-interview with Italian journalist Pietro Petrucci, was the story of the state of Somalia since its independence (1960) told by somebody who served its country as a shepherd, doctor, minister and refugee. Siad Barre, was the dictator who first appointed him as Minister of Health and Minister of Culture and Information in the ‘70s and then jailed him from 1982 to 1988; after Barre’s government fell in January 1991, three different self-declared “presidents” started fighting for the control of the territory and the international community was about to intervene.

After almost 20 years, 15 peace conferences, and after 500 thousands people died because of the civil war, Mohamed Aden Sheikh is still looking forward to seeing you in Mogadishu and to come back to his country. Piracy is just the last issue that has come out from the violent anarchy that has been characterizing Somalia since 1991. But what are the causes of this anarchy and what are the possible solutions? Mohamed Aden, who now lives in Italy and is still a privileged observer of his country, has his lucid answers and warns the skeptics: “We do not have to lose hope: I am still waiting.”

Peace conferences

From 1991 to 2009, 15 peace conferences took place to try to solve the situation in Somalia. Today peace in Somalia has still not been achieved. The main conferences took place in Djibouti in 2002, in Nairobi in 2004 and again in Djibouti in 2008. During these conferences three different presidents were elected: Abdiqasim Salad Hassan was never able to expand his authority beyond the outskirts of Mogadishu; Abdullahi Yusuf was never able to enter Mogadishu; the current president, Sherif Sheikh Ahmed, although elected only at the end of January 2009, is facing several difficulties in being recognized as President in southern Somalia. Over 30 million dollars was spent for these three conferences.

Q: Mr. Sheikh, Somalia is again on the headlines. Reading the news it seems that Somalia is the right place to experiment some of the worst crimes in the world: terrorism before, piracy now. What is happening?

A: The media and the international community seem to be concerned only when a new problem emerges, but those problems are just a consequence of 18 years of civil war and a population that in several areas of the country does not have an adequate level of self-sufficiency. This indeed does not really worry the international community.

However the international community tried to do a lot: the US/UN mission in the ‘90s failed, 15 peace conferences were sponsored by Western countries. What more should they do? The international community acts without a strategy. They

have spent millions of dollars to organize those peace conferences, but they did not act in a coherent manner. I was there during the 2004 peace conference in Nairobi, and I spoke with US envoy's spokesperson. Knowing that most of the money was given to local warlords and was spent in luxurious and useless hotels in Nairobi, I asked him whether they had any form of accountability. He said no. The problem is that it seems that, for some countries, this situation of anarchy is even better than any State. Whenever they want, they can bomb suspect criminals without asking anyone and without being charged by anybody, whereas with a functioning State, they would not have the same freedom to act in a foreign land.

Q: Today you are a fine observer of the situation, but there was a time when you were directly involved in the political process. Why don't we go back to understand the causes of the actual situation?

A: I am a doctor. In the late '60s, 9 years after Somalia's independence and a failed experiment of parliamentarian democracy, a group of militaries guided by Siad Barre carried out a coup d'état. The previous government was so corrupt that the population welcomed the newcomers. In fact, Barre and his colonels were unprepared to manage the situation from the political point of view, so they decided to go call a group of 20 or 25 young and brilliant professionals who studied abroad to establish the government. I was a young doctor, graduated in Italy, and was among this group of people.

Q: You have been minister twice under Siad Barre, but you have also been in jail twice. Why?

A: The experiment of the group of young professionals guided by a military power functioned well for a certain period of time. We were able to do several important reforms, we introduced a national health care system, we introduced the written language (before that, Somali was just a spoken language) and we started universal education. The experiment started to fail when the expectations of some of the professionals involved in the process were not met. Barre became increasingly suspicious of the people around him and he started to doubt many of us.

Q: So why did many people finish their career in jail and even died there?

A: After having lost the war against Ethiopia, in 1978, Barre started to be isolated internationally because we had lost the support of the Soviet Union without gaining the US's support (as Barre thought he would). And the divergences between the group of professionals and Barre were becoming deeper. Barre reacted using his military power and put in jail whom-ever he thought could have threatened his power. But this policy was also the beginning of his end.

In 1991 Barre was forced to leave the capital and go to the South, but the situation after Barre seemed even worse.

Barre did not prepare his succession and did not prepare the country for democracy. In 1991 Somalia was free from the Cold War, but it was also abandoned on its own; after 10 years of failed World Bank politics, the welfare state built in the '70s was partially destroyed and several different groups were trying to take over Barre's role.

Q: Were those groups the famous Somali clans?

A: First of all, it is important to understand that Somalia is one of the rare countries in Africa which has one language, one religion, one big clan. Then, the big Somali clan has other 6 clans, which have sub-clans, etc. Traditionally most of these sub-groups were shepherds often fighting to have the better space and water for their cattle. When Barre came into power he was able to unify the country under the flag of one clan, one nation. But when he started to radicalize his government, the subclans organized themselves for his succession. And when Barre fell, even the army split into different groups referring to a particular subclan.

Q: Is this division in clans the main obstacle to peace?

A: I would not say so. The warlords who proclaim themselves sub-clan leaders in most cases are not recognized as such by the members of the subclan. The central issue is not the clan but money, power and various trafficking managed by those warlords.

Q: In your opinion, what should the international community do in order to facilitate the peace process?

A: First of all, it should recognize its mistakes. In 2004 they supported president Abdullahi Yusuf even though he had a charismatic leadership only in the Puntland region and not all over Somalia. He asked Ethiopia for help, even though Ethiopians, according to the Somali, are eyewash. He never tried to start a reconciliation with the other members of the parliament. After 4 years even the most blind among the international community had recognized the mistake, but in the meanwhile this time was wasted and the situation had worsened. The radical Muslim group Shaabab, that is still not loved by most of the Somalis, is ruling in several areas in south Somalia.

Secondly, it would be necessary to create a committee able to design a road map, discuss it with the various actual subclan leaders and then provide them the instruments to implement it.

Third, they should involve the Somali emigrants in other parts of the world because there are a lot of them and because more than half of the Somali income comes from the diaspora all over the world.

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Current clans and social actors in Somalia

In Somalia, there are six different clans and several sub-clans. The four main clans are Darod, Hawiye, Issaq and Rahanwein. Issaq is mainly located in the self-declared Republic of Somaliland in Northern Somalia. Rahanwein and Hawiye are located in central Somalia, in the East and West respectively. Darod is located in the self-declared Republic of Puntland and in southern Somalia.