

EDITOR'S NOTE

I begin this brief note with this announcement: *hereafter, and after 18 years, Bildhaan will become available, starting with the 2019 volume, in electronic version only.* Beginning with the maiden volume in 2001, we had established an easily accessible website that is a repository for all hitherto published materials. This is the link: <https://digitalcommons.maclester.edu/bildhaan/>

Most observers acknowledge seismic changes are now underway in the Horn of Africa. As a result of the unexpected rise of a new Ethiopian prime minister, Abiy Ahmed Ali, from the Oromo ethnic group, a novel and breathtaking vision is swirling in the region. This surging paradigmatic shift is already impacting both the Ethiopian domestic and regional political topographies. In the case of the first, dramatic and positive changes in the relationship between the Ethiopian state and its richly diverse citizenry is unfolding. Among the most significant are: (a) the selection of an Oromo person to head the government for the first time in the history of modern Ethiopia, (b) the appointment of women to half of his cabinet, (c) a new and fresh invitation for the resistant Amhara community to reenter peaceful and civic national politics, (d) the immediate release of notable political prisoners, (e) a reassertion of popular participation and freedom of expression, and (f) an overall re-energizing of democratic governance. On the wider regional front, the implications are even more notable. First, a daring breakthrough with regard to the long, bitter, and violent stalemate between Ethiopia and Eritrea has been swiftly promulgated. In this context, a satisfactory settlement over the contentious border between the two countries is now ushering an unconstrained travel and trade between the two peoples. Second, the Prime Minister and the long-serving and authoritarian President of Eritrea, Isaias Afwerki, have publically stated that the two countries will support the integrity of the sovereignty of Somalia. Third, Mr. Ahmed has underscored the urge to move the Horn of Africa towards a larger and more integrated developmental agenda. Add these together, and more, the new initiatives are not only exhilarating but, more importantly and if made to bear fruit, could transform the region from its current profile as the epitome of ubiquitous hunger, disease, ignorance, insecurity, malignant sectarianism, and vulnerability to old and new outside manipulations, to one of rising quality of wellbeing, collective confidence, and emerging cosmopolitanism. In short, kudos to Prime Minister Ahmed—he has

triggered potentially colossal changes that are at once worth encouraging and watching with great interest.

Another historic happening took place in the Republic of Somaliland: the successful *national* presidential election of November 2017. The three established and constitutionally permitted political parties—i.e. *Wadani*, *Ucid*, and the ruling *Kulmiye*—contested for the much-delayed presidency of the country. Notwithstanding a heavy and regressive dose of tribalist small-mindedness, particularly by *Wadani* and *Kulmiye*, the nearly month-long campaign was generally vibrant and peaceful. Furthermore, when polling day arrived, the country was calm and the process concluded with impressive orderliness. *Kulmiye* won decisively, by over eighty thousand votes (around 54% of the total) beyond its closest and major competitor *Wadani*. During the immediate aftermath, the leadership of *Wadani* had expressed bitter concern over the voting process and accused it of electoral fraudulence, as well as pointed out what they believed to be an illegitimate and blatant use of the financial and other assets of the state, to secure *Kulmiye's* victory. However, the numerous international monitors on the ground unanimously certified that, though the contest was fierce, overall the election was quite fair and free.

There is no question that the consummation of the presidential election in Somaliland, the third nation-wide of its type since the rebirth of the country in 1991, has marked its politics distinctly from that of Somalia. In the case of the latter, any hope of a national election—i.e. one person, one vote—is still in the distant future. The reasons for this great divergence include Somaliland's relative civic cohesiveness, its working national political institutions, and its professional and able security forces. In comparison, Somalia continues to be bedeviled by a toxic cocktail of tribalized zones, self-seeking individualism, fissionary identity politics, corruption as a way of life among the lumpen elite, and direct and dark financial interventions by foreign countries, particularly from the Middle East, in search of compradors. This condition, now entering its third decade, gives the lie to the claim of the existence of an effective government in Somalia. On the contrary, the writ of Mogadishu is not uncontestedly enforceable in the whole of the capital, let alone maintaining law and order across the width and breadth of Somalia. More pointedly, *Al-Shabaab* forces are resilient and continue to be very active, with particularly violent disruptions of quotidian life in Mogadishu. Such is the condition even after nearly \$2 billion of aid, primarily for supporting UNISOM/AMISOM, from the

United States alone in the past ten years. In short, the fallout from the total wreckage of the post-colonial Somali state, more than a quarter of a century ago, still debilitatively haunts the people of Somalia.

But the generalized euphoria that accompanied the electoral success of *Kulmiye* in Somaliland about a year ago seems to be short-lived. More pointedly, that spirit of high expectation, one based on a coast-to-coast campaign that stressed five urgent public policy priorities—that is, strengthening civic bonding, stimulating economic growth accompanied by environmental protection, reconstructing educational institutions, addressing the gravity of public health, and reinvigorating international relations—is vaporizing. As a result, there is palpable collective descent into what Somalilanders call *Amakaag iyo Yaab* (i.e. bewilderment and dismay). This worrisome reaction is building up for the following (among other) reasons:

- President Bihi is yet to concretize in real time the alluring and compact vision that galvanized the majority of the voters—one grounded in broad justice, kin and gender equity, and high administrative performance—that was promised to the country.
- The composition of his cabinet contradicts the repetitively asserted campaign pledge to appoint women and men of the highest caliber. Moreover, the agreed upon postulate of establishing a maximum limit of twenty ministerial portfolios has been breached. In fact, Bihi immediately returned to the old and defective formula of exaggerated appointments (32 ministers and deputies) and conspicuous communal imbalance that is exceedingly partial to the kin community in the middle of the country (22 vs. 10 and only one full minister who is female). Given the thick rancor surrounding the issue of fairness, it is seems appropriate to heed this wise insight of Michael Ignatieff:

Interethnic accommodation anywhere depends on equilibrium of forces. An ethnic minority can live in peace with an ethnic majority, as long as that majority does not use its preponderance to turn the institutions of the state into an instrument of ethnic favoritism.

- Bihi has admirably and decisively reduced the venal and scandalous use of state revenues, particularly by senior officials. Nevertheless, the effect of the confluence of an absence of economic growth, rising prices, degrading local currency, and severe unemployment rate among the youth is a looming and generalized immiseration. Thus, the majority of the denizens of Somaliland are increasingly becoming deprived hovel dwellers.
- Bihi's administration continues the unsophisticated, ill-planned, poorly staffed, and niggardly funded approach to international affairs. This has been the bane of Somaliland's global relations since the country's rebirth twenty-seven and a half years ago. Despite the mounting and dizzying changes taking place in the neighborhood and farther-afield, then, Somaliland is stuck at a sophomoric level in both understanding the complexities of the search for recognition, as well as taking stock of the strategic shifts that are in-progress.
- There is no evidence that neither the Ministry of Education nor the Ministry of Public Health has been, thus far, given the supreme attention and reform that each needs so desperately. For it is a common article of faith in the modern world that these two seminal priorities set the foundation for the production of high quality human capital.
- The two opposition parties have become feckless and seem incapable, thus far, of offering an analytical and inspiring civic critique. Furthermore, the main opposition, *Wadani*, which garnered a striking 43 percent of the total vote, is still wailing over the defeat. More than a year later, *Wadani* has shown no signs that it is a robust national political institution—one that is competent to hold on tightly to its large supporters, restock its vision for the country, win over more citizens to its side, and prepare itself for the competitions ahead.
- The long, long overdue parliamentary election, which has been delayed for over **eight** years, was marked to take place in March 2019. This will not be possible again. The reasons for this include: (a) a highly charged dispute over the tenure of the Electoral Commission such that *Wadani* believes must be terminated before any new national elections are to be mounted, (b) *Wadani's* conviction that the majority of the Commission is a disguised and biased members of *Kulmiye* and, therefore, a new Commission with equal representation from the three parties must

be created, and (c) the long-standing disgruntlement by the kin communities in the western and eastern Somaliland over what they believe to be a severely lopsided and unacceptable distribution of parliamentary seats, one that allots 56 out of the total of 82 seats to the kin community in the geographical center of the country. This impasse, full of murky intrigue, has at least three immediate and critical ramifications. First, the current Parliament, despite unanimity among Somalilanders that it is functionally comatose, will linger on. Second, Somaliland's acclaimed democratic logos and practice will suffer greater devaluation. This is particularly the case among the members of the international society, more so the European Union, whose material and moral sympathy for Somaliland has been indispensable. Third, such a situation will further discount President Bihi's declaration that his leadership will be drastically different from the previous regime in that national elections will be conducted on the appointed month and year. All in all, then, Somalilanders will do well to hear and act on these sagacious and highly relevant words from Vico, penned nearly three hundred years ago.

That body politics is most fortunate, indeed, where the rigorous observance of the law that binds citizens together like the worship of an unknown god; where communal discipline is maintained with no less impartiality and firmness than in an army, where no soldier is allowed to question an order, his only duty being to await commands alertly and execute them.

Given the preceding and the total dissonance with those who had voted for all parties with high hopes, Somaliland seems to be, as it were, "snatching defeat from the jaws of victory." Combined, the above concerns, unless attended with alacrity and haste, are bound to corrode collective *phronesis*. Such, in the end, is the critical difference between what Sartre called "seriality"—passive and thin commonality imposed from without—and civic, thick and active republicanism deliberately made within. On the whole then, 2019 is likely to be a year of big stakes and heightened anxieties.

Lastly, I share two pieces of good news. First, the fortieth anniversary of the Somali Studies International Congress was successfully convened in Hargeisa in the summer of 2018 and hosted by the Hargeisa Cultural Center and the University of Hargeisa. Second, we welcome Dr. Jama Muse Jama as a new member of the International Advisory Board of *Bildhaan*. Dr. Jama is the founding Director of the Hargeisa Cultural Center. This is a permanent regional hub that runs research and cultural programs, including an annual Book Fair that is now in its eleventh year. Dr. Jama has earned a BA degree in mathematics at Somali National University, an MA at the University of Pisa (Italy), and a doctorate at Oriental University in Naples, Italy. He was the Chair of the organizing committee for the 2018 of SSIA. At that time, he assumed the presidency of the SSIA.