

EDITOR'S NOTE

Even as it beckons, human beings have no direct experience with eternity. Only the gods know about that. But we can delineate the beginning moment of a human endeavor and perhaps its end. With this volume, we celebrate the *twentieth* anniversary of the inception of *Bildhaan*. As the first international journal of Somali Studies, in an age of cynicism, schism, and dreadful intellectual retrogression at so many different levels, we take pride in its survival. Notwithstanding the growth of school attendance and the opening of many “universities,” in all the Somali territories, the quality of education and civic public discourse are being ruined by the combination of a severe lack of funds and the closing of the cultural mind. As a matter of fact, the latter is so especially disabling that there are calls, from many quarters, for a wider and open debate as to the causes of this liability and how to overcome it. For *Bildhaan*, there were moments in these past two decades when doubts entered into our minds. However, the founding of the journal as well as its perseverance has been undergirded by a number of priceless sources.

The most critical was, and continues to be, my own institution—Macalester College. From the day we hatched the idea of *Bildhaan* to this anniversary, twenty years later, Macalester has been the indispensable patron. The precious support from our Department of International Studies, the generosity of the President's Office, and the superb work of our Communications and Marketing Unit, the college's extraordinary support, in so many other ways, has been laudatory. On behalf of the editors and the International Advisory Board, then, I would like to take this opportunity to express my profound gratitude to Macalester. It is a fine academic institution that sets, among its peers, the standard of how to successfully interdigitate seriousness of intellectual purpose and cosmopolitan civic consciousness. Hence, it has been my professional life's privilege to have been a member of its esteemed professoriate for the past twenty-eight years.

Second, I would like to recognize four other academic institutions that enthusiastically joined us in the founding of *Bildhaan*. These were: The University of Pennsylvania, College of the Holy Cross, California State University, Chico, and Wellesley College. All of them came

forward with financial contributions that were so necessary for the inaugural volume. In the case of the University of Pennsylvania, I salute Professor Lee Cassanelli (the author of the opening essay in this issue) for his continuing care and assistance. The late Professor Hussein Adam of the College of the Holy Cross offered us consistent encouragement. We miss his humane intellect and irreplaceable leadership in global Somali Studies. At Chico, Professor Charles Gesheker was not only a principal believer, from the beginning, in the birth of *Bildhaan*, but has been a yearly sustainer ever since. However, no one individual has given more to the establishment of *Bildhaan* than Professor Lidwien Kapteijns of Wellesley College. Her incisive intellect, devotion to humanistic scholarship, strong believe in institution-building, uncommon personal generosity, particularly in labour time, and a refreshing sense of irony and humor, were crucial to the founding and early sustenance of the journal. All in all, I treasure the particular backing from each of these colleagues and their respective academic homes.

Third, I express my debt to our Associate Editors. Of special mention here is Margaret Beegle. Her rigorous editorial eye, patience, and empathy are a rare combination. *Bildhaan* has been the beneficiary of those attributes – thank you, Margaret! We acknowledge the presence of our International Advisory Board. They have been on call whenever we needed them.

Fourth, in our Department of International Studies, I single out Janessa Cervantes, the assistant editor, for her all-around dedication, which includes an admirable mixture of exacting professionalism and ease of demeanor. In addition, I want to acknowledge my gratitude to Paul Cosme (from the Philippines), a gifted senior at Macalester and mature beyond his age. I have watched him up close these past three years. I have taught him in all of my courses, helped him design and supervise a tutorial on a theme of his choice, has been a preceptor, on multiple occasions, for my introductory course on globalization, and is currently working on an honors thesis under my supervision. But most relevant to this anniversary volume is Paul's reading of all the contributions and suggesting editorial improvements, and patiently typing my interview with *Dahabshiiil*. In brief, Paul typifies the best of our splendid students.

Similar to the rest of our readers, I do not know what the immediate future, let alone the coming decades, will bring. Be that as it may, I wish good fortune for all of us around the world. To be sure, the journal's continuing existence, let alone flourishing, will depend on a younger generation of scholars, writers, poets, and other creative producers.

The closing of 2021 is marked by splintered image. On the one hand, the grip of the costly COVID19 continues, with the numerous deaths of many whom we knew. On the other hand, the availability (though still scarce in the Somali territories) of vaccine against the virus is slowly happening. Perhaps, however, in the thicket of quotidian life, the deeper and more worrisome challenges for Somali people in the Horn (and indirectly the diaspora) are older and multitude of deprivations and resultant sufferings, now over three decades long. These are direct consequences of the denudation and ultimate loss of civic spirit and a legitimate and capable national state. Though at some socio-economic and cultural distance, what Antonio Gramsci said about the Italy and the Europe of his epoch seems appropriate here in the Somali society of the 21st century, *"the crisis consists precisely in this: the old is dying, and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."* To face up to this disabling and demeaning plight, Somalis must realize that they are not exempt from the history of universal human struggles. For, to reclaim their collective dignity, psychic stability and confidence, and material wellbeing, Somalis must, first, produce better analyses of their condition that will, in turn, guide the building of competent and legitimate national institutions. Furthermore, an immediate gauge of the promise of such institutions would be their capacity to incubate creative ideas and free imagination, and the cultivation of what Ibn Khaldoun, so many centuries ago, called *"habits of excellence."* Such, then, is the fundamental dialectic that captures the nature of the current Somali predicament. To begin this undeniable and imposing task, a new *saga* is imperative. That is, one that at once reanimates the best of the past chronicles and invents fresh and progressive telos. In this context, then, the fitting words of the 20th century Awdalian poet, Aw Jama Af Yare, that were recently

shared with me by the writer / poet Bashir Goth, may trigger a sobering reflection:

Haddii aanan hawrahawraha ku dhicin, Hadawga duullaaya

Habaaska iyo siigada haddaan, Uga horreyn wayoo

Hadba dunida wax soo hadhaan, La hadli doonaaye.

If I do not fall into the inferno of the flying heatwave

Or if I am not swallowed first by the whirling dust storm

Then I will surely talk to whoever survives this time of anguish.

One place, in the Somali territories, where a modicum of hope flickers is the Republic of Somaliland. The latest evidence, in addition to the durable, thus far, sustainability of generalized public safety and collective security, is the successful conclusion (though over a decade late) of the mid-year's local and parliamentary elections. More noteworthy are: (a) the extent of the full play of democratic contestation among the three political parties and their respective candidates, (b) the fact that the Somaliland state funded from its own, otherwise utterly feeble, finances, three quarters of the cost of the preparations and the running of the election -- a far cry from the ignominious syndrome of Somali dependency on the outside world, (c) the immediate acceptance by the ruling party (Kulmiye) and the President, Musa Bihi Abdi, of the inordinate defeat of the majority of their candidates, and (d) the election, by a wide margin, to a seat in the new House of Representatives, of an outstanding candidate and from the main opposition, to boot. Remarkably, and against the grain, he happened to belong to a quantitatively small, though impressively inventive, highly discriminated against and cruelly scorned kin group in the capital, Hargeisa. This phenomenal victory took place only once before in post-colonial Somaliland time -- the first election in 1960. While the past, then, might be a prologue, as it were, even these successful local and parliamentary

elections demonstrated their own sharp deficits. The first and most telling is the fact that, despite over a dozen qualified women running as candidates for the House of Representatives, none were elected. This is a measure of the toxic brew of tribalism, perennial and griding patriarchy, and venal vote-buying that, together, make up a conspicuous part of the trademarks of the political culture of the country. Second, despite all the industrious energy that went into the campaigns, one could find no evidence for even minimum debates or public discussions about the grim socio-economic, environmental, cultural, diplomatic, and institutional challenges that permeate life in Somaliland. Third, even among the large cabinet (over 30 appointments), rather exaggerated and unwise for a small and extremely impoverished country of barely four million people, there is only a single woman who is a full minister among the nearly two dozen senior portfolios. The other looming and testing civic assignments for Somaliland in 2022 are three: (a) the planning and conducting the election of the members of the House of Elders (*Guurti*) whose tenure has been overrun by more than twenty years, (b) the implementing of the constitutionally-mandated opening (every ten years) the opportunity for new political parties to compete with the existing ones, and (c) the execution of the contest for the presidency of Somaliland. Each one of these is an exacting project on its own. To pull off all will be the greatest political, institutional, and administrative assessment that Somaliland has faced since its successful renaissance. In the eventuality that these monumental tasks are consummated and in time, there is little doubt that the reputation of the country and its people around the world will soar to new heights. A pivotal and concrete consequence of such a feat will be a greater material and diplomatic support of the kind that Somaliland has been desperately yearning for the past three decades.

Lastly, the Somalia situation. Despite continuing international recognition and access to the world as a sovereign state, the old demons that were the source of civic destruction continue to haunt the country. Public safety, particularly in Mogadishu, is precarious. Refugees continue to live in wretched camps in neighboring countries and internally displaced populations are conspicuous in most towns. Wide spread and chronic pauperism is the main feature everywhere. Civic consciousness is still at the pitiful mercy of the combined forces of overt and divisive tribalism, narrow individual self-interest, acute fraudulence, and the hardening of exclusive territorial fragmentation.

Among the immediate fall out from this imbroglio is the disheartening approach, as of this writing, to these two impending and critical challenges: (a) the *selection* of members of the two houses of parliament, and (b) the election of a new President of Somalia by the new parliamentarians. The current incumbent's legitimate tenure has already expired by nearly a year. In short, and grievously, Somalia's horrific political squalor enters its fourth decade with little hope in sight. Still, there are women and men, from every part of the Somali world, who have not given up. Notwithstanding the repetitive spectacle of degeneration and the crushing weight of accumulated sorrow, they persevere in their strong conviction that a renewal of national identity, collective esteem and the beauty of a redeeming civic spirit are always worthy of persistent struggle for every generation.