

**Book Review of “Reconfiguring the Somali Nation: Changing Conversations, Shifting Paradigms” by Dr. Abdirashid M. Ismail**  
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With three chapters of main themes that cover the writer's thoughts about the new insights of Culture: The *E theories*, cultural dimensions in Somali state-building: focusing Somali case that talks about the past as a mirror and the final chapter that tries to present the future in the present, the writer has tried to build on the conception of culture in new lights which he bases it on the historically significant ideological changes and challenges on the concept of culture itself. He also relates it to why this changing definition also lends a hand in the difficulty of having a concrete definition of the *Soomaalinnimo* a notion that centres on the ideology that all ethnic Somalis are one and should be one nation by coming together and making a united one state. It also entails the political mission of bringing the territories inhabited by ethnic Somalis in the Horn of Africa together since they were divided by colonial artificial borders. Hence, the book deals in-depth with the rebuilding of the Somali nation throughout the process of independence, aspiration for unity, and current failure, especially in the state-building process of the central Somali state, the Federal State of Somalia (FSS). Fusing it with the concept of “*Dhaqan celis*”, an expression used to describe young people who are born and raised in a different cultural context than their family generational lineage and upbringing, making them a bit of an alien in their expected cultural and community orientation, therefore repatriated back to Somali inhabited lands. His correlation of this term with that of the challenged state building in the Central Somali context is the mismatch between the input and the output that is measured as a failure without understanding the inherent contextual difference that dismays the expected outcome. The outsiders-induced conception-based state building, especially in the FSS, has left the nation in an endless vicious cycle of conflict with international concepts of state building and ownership of the process dominating the internally context-based process.

The first chapter, accordingly, walks through all sorts of definitions of culture that add to the contemporary challenge of defining any concept that included the epicenter of the chapter, culture. Starting from the revolutionary conception of culture to the colonization period that presented the superiority of western culture to that of Dawkins’ Selfish Gene bases, its argument on genetics in contemporary times is claimed as a resurgence of the evolutionist theory for the arguments of the writer. In support of the transformation, the writer has presented 4 basic assumptions: culture as a means for human beings to be in the highest state of being; culture as one built on units that function as a cohesive, interactive, and dynamic system; culture changes to adjust itself with the ecological change; and culture as an outcome of human global interaction. This is where the author underlines the challenge with the labelling of “*Dhaqan celis*” while missing the point of the unavoidable change in culture due to the global interaction. In the end, the writer makes an appointment of the challenges and yet he himself stays away from having a definition but shows the exciting alternative point of view.

The second chapter talks about the new ways of looking at the state building by challenging the old and dominant narration of classical historiography which tries to base its explanation for the fall of the Somali nation on causality. It also states that one of the reasons for the fall of the Somali state is the discrepancy between the Somali clan mode of organization and the newly adopted democratic system which has led to the classic governance man-making history postulation used in dominant narration. The chapter also talks about the Somali Unity Political Project (SUPP) by illustrating how all along the decades and centuries history seemed to portray unity in a certain way and how Somalis portray it in another way that created the gap and contributed to continuous discordance led to up to the final collapse of the Republic of Somalia. The writer also metaphorically illustrates how the view of the whole makes it possible to understand the parts and not the other way around.

As points of the evolutionary approach, that serves both the promontory and as a tool for interpretations. The writer asserts that the past is too strong for Somalis and we can't erase its bitter memories when its ill effects stare at us going up at every twist and turn.

The other strong assertion made by the writer in the book is that Somalis had never experienced a golden era of *Soomaalinnimo*. Going further as a way of presenting this conception, the writer talks about Somali unity and union; the ethnic reality as opposed to the historical and political project and the *Soomaalinnimo*. His three-fold points of view are centred on the opposition between the unity and union of Somalis, the colonial experience, and the *Soomaalinnimo* concept itself. He states that the confusion of the union as a way of having one government, one president, and parliament and country while unity is inherent for Somalis in reference to the ethnic Somali and union was out of the scope of Somalis arguing that "how can we unite things which already down together by the emotive bonds of kinship and geological ties". The misunderstanding of the Union and Unity is presented as one of the main factors that have complicated the matter. The SUPP has a different mode of organization and what and how the union was swept aside is the strong assertion of the writer.

The writer walks us through the SUPP to understand Somali recent history again calming that the state-building structure is alien to the natural Somali governance system by trying to make it western alike in opposition to the natural one which is labelled as "Pastoral Democracy" by several scholars. The union seemed to be made somehow working by the union of the two independent units (the Italian and British Somaliland) which again became another problem as it tried to create a centralized system of governance which is not the way Somalis governed.

In stating the inexorable events towards SUPP failure, the dervish turmoil presented as a result of the Islamic literacy of the

elites who tried to imagine the Somali state under the Islamic rule of the Umma which failed as it was not based on the Somali tradition or Islamic Law. The colonizers’ arrangement that tried to cut Italy from occupying all of the Somali ethnic-dominated regions is also considered from the international point of view where the failure is also set. The handing of the Haud over to Ethiopia and the decision of NFD to stay with Kenya is stated as a point of interest in the failed process. The war against Ethiopia is also stated as another potential point that contributed to the failure of the project. In conclusion, the writer states that the political project failed not because of Siyad Barre’s regime failure but because he led to the ultimate consequences of a political project. And also, the Somalis failed to unite themselves despite their attempt because they were trying to bring the union to a centralized western version.

The book foresees the future in the present by talking about the new project which is stated as a point not to walk on a tricky line of respect for the territorial integrity of any nation by setting four conditions if it has to be a successful project. The four conditions are; respect for other nations and respect to national and international laws this union is said to be in respect to the principle stated to be a contributing factor for peaceful existence not only for Somali as a nation but also as a regional and international peace dividend. For this, the writer suggests having a new objective and definition for the project aligned to the past experience and using contemporary realities that include the opportunity that Somali has the longest coastal line that is interesting to all along with contemporary interests for the region as a whole expressed for example by international superpowers who are in Djibouti and eye the Somali territories. He also presents the new arrangement in the Federal State of Somalia which has five regional states. For this he suggests setting the political project which one hand can provide the regions with autonomy and Somalis a central power based on a common custom-based structure that still demands a new way of thinking and a historical restart.

**The proposed project**

The project as a way forward is recommended on the bases of the following four points: a union on the bases of empowerment of regions; prioritization of the conflict resolution capacities; resolution of the Somaliland case; and a fundamental change in the Somali clan system. The writer states that since 1991 the new project has manifested itself even though it is challenged by different dimensions including the elite and old political ideology advocates which made it difficult to implement it. The empowering of the regions stands on the confusion for the state nature that bases its foundation on centralism or clannism which is stated as a seesaw since 1960 when the writer kept on stressing the importance of giving points for the natural organization of the society.

The writer advocates for having a different perspective on clannism and states that it shall not be looked at from all the negatives only which has a chance to be corruptive and challenge the provision of justice. But he also states this is a natural character of a state and finds a way to have mechanisms to address these challenges and use the centralized clan system as it has been the only functional system after the collapse of the Somali state. He also characterized the current regional state formation in Somalia as a bottom-up approach that is centred on the old historical system of traditional solidarity which is a decisive phase and achievement on which the Somali nation should be constructed. He then brings up the necessity to have a faithful conflict resolution mechanism presented as modern-traditional-Islam. The effectiveness of this capacity is said to be on the level of trust in the composition and the process. For this, the writer stressed the importance of not reducing this body as a justice reform but rather as a permanent or an ad hoc body that assists the states to deliver on many levels giving the examples such as the counsel of elderlies (*Guurti*), or peacekeeper (*Nabaddoon*). Nevertheless, the writer says that the only

legitimate capacity builder for this process was supposed to be the Federal State of Somalia which doesn't have the power yet.

Resolving the Somaliland case was also stated as a prerequisite for the new project's effectiveness. Starting with six negative effects the non-resolution status of the Somaliland case for the union that is seen as a wakening issue for the serenity of Somali, space for foreign interference with the growing interest in the region, the sustaining of the civil which is a challenge for opening a new page for Somali, the disadvantage for Somaliland for development and also as a factor for delaying the reunification of the Somali state.

The writer points out some issues such as the desire of Somaliland to get access to international aid or assistance which the writer says is not always a blessing, especially in the African context as the access has become a means for 'international community' interference in the domestic issues of the receiving nation. He also adds that this nativity is a way for others to manipulate it by stating the intensive interest Ethiopia has in Somaliland now with the implementation of the Berbera Corridor too. He also states the positive case of Somaliland brought in indigenous or home-grown political stability in democratic system building even though it has not provided economic empowerment, especially for the youth as an enabler and example in state and peacebuilding.

The fundamental changes are said to be around the constitution of the kinship segments which the writer argues has not significantly changed throughout the change of events in the states. The writer states that two forces that are antagonistic to each other; the clan as a centrifugal and the state as a centripetal has kept the union and Somali state in a state of a pendulum or the regular turning of an hourglass. He states that Somaliness has no formal foundation, which is why they cannot establish one shared state. The clans are the real constitutional segments of the Somali state, and they have no social contract between these

clans. He however states there is only one that has managed to do this which is *the Xeer Issa* which is extensively presented in the book with the unique structures that the writer suggested as a model for the Somali union. As a building blocks the writer has presented a few of the founding principles of the *Xeer Issa* which are; equality before the law, the importance of the law, the principle of communality, the selection and role of the *Ugaas*, and the foreign policy and reconciliation systems.

In general, the writer on his book advocates for a new perspective based on the assumed natural path for Somali state-building that centre on the ethnic level of identity presentation that sets its legs on the supra-clan segment. Rightly so he sets the variables such as the misconceptions, as well as the intermix between them in an eloquent manner. In a way, the book illustrates the challenge and realities of the new world order whereby the change is inevitable but looking into the social fabrics of their own communities and customizing, adapting, and making it make sense to their actual community rather than applying ideologies in the name of the global community is advocated by the writer. He also has indicated directions on how the past can guide and lend functioning mechanisms to address contemporary challenges with our romanticizing the past. He stresses indigenous systems from the past shall be allowed to evolve in a natural process to show the path for the future. Hence, in reconfiguring the Somali state understanding the difference between 'unity' and 'union', the role of grassroots ownership for state building, understanding the peculiarities of the Somali community, and making use of systems that are culturally and historically inherent to the society is highly emphasized to have a balanced understanding of the *Dhaqan celis* and the total alien importation of methods to forge unity or even the state-building project. The clarity in language and presentation of details in a balanced manner helps to follow the arguments and explanations in the book smoothly. In a region that yet hasn't found its peaceful days with complex historiography, incomplete state-building projects, and

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challenges that are beyond sovereign borders and all, such books are instrumental in evaluating what has worked and what needs reconfiguring. That is why while this book talks about the Somali States, the conception of reconfiguring will be important for the other nations in the region too.