

Reviewing the Somali Government's First 100 Days

On 3 March 2013 Prime Minister Abdi Farah Shirdon stood before parliament and presented his government's accomplishments of its first hundred days. Such a proactive strategy in itself is commendable. It shows an appreciation for institutional checks and balances, acknowledges parliament's oversight role, and contributes to the establishment of an open and accountable governance system in Somalia. Furthermore, this preliminary exercise demonstrates that Somalia's political leaders realize that citizens - through their representatives - expect rapid and tangible results.

One hundred days, however, is too short to fully assess the Somali government's performance let alone carry out a proper appraisal of programs. Nonetheless, since the government presented an overview of its achievements, it is worth reflecting on its claims while shedding some light on the direction of such developments. Needless to say, any evaluation must be contextualized within the prevailing circumstances, as the new government operates under a difficult and uniquely challenging political, economic and security environment – a situation that all stakeholders readily acknowledge.

The most reasonable task that the new government could have achieved in 100 days was to lay the foundation for laws, systems, and processes that would put the country on a path of effective, transparent, and accountable governance. There is reason to believe that the government is on the right trajectory. It has now passed seven laws, pertaining to finance, the judiciary, human rights, and tariffs. Eight others, concerning police reform, telecommunications, media, and energy are pending.

However, when one looks beyond the intentions and plans of the current government, which are too many to enumerate in this short brief, one finds a mixed record characterized by a jarring imbalance between foreign and domestic policy priorities, slow response to economic and political crises, immodesty in rhetoric and, above all, an unhealthy imbalance between the presidency and the cabinet.

Foreign Policy

The president made high-level visits to important capitals such as Washington, London, Ankara, Brussels, Kampala, Doha, Nairobi, Cairo, Addis Ababa and Riyadh. He has firmly established his government's non-transitional credentials.

His government has argued successfully for the easing of the arms embargo by the UN and resisted Kenya's bid to establish an AMISOM naval unit at the expense of the nascent Somali navy. The government also deserves credit for refusing to accept the business-as-usual meddling of external actors.

The most assertive foreign policy stand - which irked both Nairobi and Addis Ababa - is Mogadishu's bold rejection of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development's (IGAD) Grand Stabilization Plan. The Plan, devised in the final days of the former Transitional Federal Government (TFG), gave Kenya and Ethiopia the authority to establish local administrations in territories recovered from al-Shabaab.

Some countries, like Uganda and Burundi, made their soldiers pay the ultimate price for Somalia's path to recovery, while others, such

as Turkey, mobilized their entire society to end Somalia's global isolation. The United States and Italy have been paying the salaries of the Somali National Forces (SNF) for years. Other countries, such as Djibouti, have come to the rescue of Somalia countless times. Still, there are others whose track record in Somalia is checkered by years of institutionalizing the balkanization of Somalia.

Even though the government seems, on the surface, to have achieved tangible diplomatic goals, it appears not to have overarching guiding principles and the necessary acumen to balance genuine friends and foreign actors. As was the case with his predecessors, the president's overseas trips appear to be having him dancing to too many and often contradicting tunes.

Somalia's staunchest allies are often puzzled of its true intentions. It is time for the government to develop and articulate a sensible foreign policy with the sole aim of advancing the national interests of Somalia.

Economic and Political Woes

The government has thus far failed to address domestic priorities adequately. High on the

president's 'Six Pillar Policy' is economic recovery. Recently the purchasing power of the middle and lower classes throughout much of south and central Somalia has eroded considerably due to a sharp drop in the value of the U.S. Dollar against the Somali Shilling. The cost of basic commodities remains stubbornly high, leaving millions of vulnerable citizens with fewer resources.

The President's Six-Pillar Policy

1. Establish functioning institutions
2. Spearhead economic recovery
3. Promote sustainable peace
4. Provide service to citizens
5. Undertake robust international relations
6. Work towards reconciliation, political dialogue and national unity

The government's response to this growing crisis has been simplistic and inconsistent. President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud claimed the exchange rate issue was a "side effect of the reforms" made by his government and asked the international community to deliver food aid to the poorest. The mayor of Mogadishu accused the businessmen who control the foreign exchange market of manufacturing the crisis. A cabinet minister insisted that sinister individuals with suitcases full of U.S. Dollars are responsible for the vanishing of Somali Shillings throughout south-central Somalia. This incoherent approach to the looming economic crisis underscores the government's perennial incapacity to respond to crisis on an institutional level and through sensible policy decisions.

On the political front, the Prime Minister's 'listening tour' in Puntland, Galmudug and the central province has certainly eased tensions and raised his profile. The government deserves credit for establishing local administrations in several Galgaduud cities following dialogue with the Ahlu-Sunna Wal-Jama'a militia that controls the area. Shirdon's trip to Puntland and Galmudug administrations was an important step toward inclusivity, enhancing dialogue with regional polities and extending the government's domain beyond the city limits of Mogadishu. Equally, the government should be commended for establishing new administrations in the Bay and Hiiraan regions after an initial hiccup.

Serious challenges remain in other regions. The Jubbaland crisis took a turn for the worse after the Somali Federal Government rejected the congress convened in Kismaayo by local clans. Prime Minister Shirdon and his cabinet have dismissed the attempt to form a regional administration in the area as "unconstitutional".

The government's approach to the Jubbaland crisis is troubling on two levels. First, the issue is not, in its current iteration, a simple constitutional problem - rather, it is a more broadly political crisis that requires political solutions. Second, the government's overall rhetoric has

been counterproductive and, in some cases, bombastic. This is unhelpful to the process of reconciliation, which is far from over.

While the Jubbaland issue is undoubtedly complex, the government's response has been imprudent. That Prime Minister Shirdon, often praised for his conciliatory approach to politics, was not deployed to the region early on is confusing and demonstrates the continued failure to leverage on his credibility. Shirdon hails from one of the communities vying for the control of Kismaayo and, as the head of the executive branch he is uniquely positioned to mitigate the crisis. Unfortunately, the government has allowed the issue to fester and emotions to boil over. As a result, the government's options vis-à-vis Jubbaland are dwindling by the day, making the environment conducive to renewed conflict in the region.

Another urgent issue is corruption, which remains widespread. While one can't expect the government to wipe out corruption within a mere 100 days, the resilience of the corruption syndicates at revenue-generating institutions is shocking. Government contracts and procurements are still not subject to oversight, and the budget allocated for each department cannot be tracked or audited properly. Fighting corruption, among the government's top three priorities, should start with dismantling the syndicates, and individuals found engaging in corrupt acts must be prosecuted.

Executive imbalance

The cabinet, initially considered "lean and focused", is increasingly becoming ineffective. 100 days into their jobs, ministers have not yet made substantial progress on the president's "Six Pillar Policy". Ministers, it would seem, are overwhelmed by the challenges they face. Short-term fire-fighting measures are given more attention than long-term planning and policy implementation.

There is a widely held perception among the public that an imbalance exists between the two highest office holders, the President and the Prime Minister. This is partly political, partly constitutional, and partly a style issue. Politically and historically, Somalis have always gravitated toward the presidency with the view that, ultimately, power rests in the elected office.

Constitutionally, however, the cabinet, under the Prime Minister, enjoys considerable powers. To his credit the President has assembled an impressive team for his new Policy Unit, which advises him on various issues. The unintended consequence of this commendable move, however, is that critics are now suggesting that a parallel executive branch is operating beside the cabinet.

The perception of an 'expanded' presidency, beyond what the federal constitution envisaged, is unhelpful to reconciliation and nation-building. The president is an elected leader who should hold executive powers. However, governments in Somalia are chronically weak

and thus require legitimacy and credibility to effect change. Such legitimacy is derived from, among other sources, the upholding of the constitution, inclusivity, and reconciliation.

Conclusion

That the government wants to be accountable and assessed is welcomed. Three months is not long enough to undertake a meaningful inventory of the government's progress. A preliminary review should provide an indication of future plans as well as missed opportunities. A cursory look at government assertions, accomplishment and agendas indicate mixed results.

There is no doubt that structural limitations and inherited challenges have prevented the government from translating certain stated objectives into actual results. It is also true that many avoidable errors and built-in idealism of the new team have got in the way and been compounded by overblown expectations – of quick fixes - on the part of the citizens.

Overall the government, however slow, is moving in the right direction. The Prime Minister's 'listening tour' is commendable. The formation of the Policy Unit at Villa Somalia is encouraging, and the diplomatic successes in recognition and easing of the UN arms embargo are timely. However, there are disturbing signs of an imbalance between foreign policy priorities and domestic achievements. Equally worrying is the perception that disparity has emerged between the two highest offices.

The presidency is accused of encroaching upon the prerogatives of the Prime Minister and his cabinet. The cabinet also has its own inherent weaknesses due to its limited number, the absence of state institutions and limited technical capacity to run such institutions. Finally, the crisis in Jubbaland has been left to fester and corruption syndicates continue to thrive and misappropriate meager public resources. The Somali government cannot be excused for allowing this to continue.

Recommendations

To the Somali Federal Government:

- Expand the council of ministers from its current 10 members to their original 18 in order to address inefficiency, accommodate all stakeholders, forge a national agenda and address the prevailing perception of exclusionary politics;
- Restore balance between the presidency and the cabinet under the Prime Minister by ensuring that the President plays his constitutional role of upholding the laws of the land and lets the cabinet run the day-to-day affairs of the country;
- Create an environment conducive to national consensus and act as managers of the current political process and not as the sole proprietors;
- Dismantle known corruption syndicates and replace them with individuals of high standing and selected purely on the basis of merit in order to increase domestic revenue and establish credibility with the donor community;
- Immediately convene a roundtable discussion on the restoration of the nation's financial well-being and enlist the assistance of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank;
- Address the exchange rate crisis, diminished purchasing powers of the Somali people, and soaring commodity prices by convening an urgent conference that includes policymakers, the business community, economic and monetary policy experts, and international financial institutions;
- Strike an interim win-win arrangement with regional stakeholders in Jubbaland with the aim of conducting, within two years, free and fair elections where citizens elect mayors, governors and regional administrators.

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