

Building peace in south central Somalia

the role of elders



a conversation with Malaq Isaak Ibraahim

Malaq Isaak Ibrahim is from the Luway sub-clan of the Rahanweyn (Digil-Mirifle) clan from Bay region in south central Somalia. He is a prominent, influential and well respected senior elder who has participated in many local and national peace processes during the last nineteen years of civil war in Somalia.

How did you become an elder?

Traditionally there are three different ways that a person can become an elder in the Digil and Mirifle community. The first is through an election process whereby clan and sub-clan members choose the elder. The second is through inheritance, when a prominent and well-respected clan elder dies and clan members crown the son of the elder and ask him to assume the responsibilities of his father. A third way is through appointment by the authorities and is the least effective of the three.

I was elected as a *Malaq* of the Luway after the previous *Malaq* passed away and have served in this role for about thirty-five years.

What has been your role in peace processes?

Like other elders of the Digil and Mirifle community, I have been entrusted by my community with important roles and responsibilities in peace processes. These are to prevent and resolve conflicts both within my sub-clan, and with other sub-clans with the help of other elders, and also to represent my Luway sub-clan in local, regional and national peace processes. For this we often use *xeer* (customary law) and *Shari'a*.

It is also my responsibility to pay and collect *diya* (blood compensation payments) from my sub-clan members if someone from my clan kills other clan members. Likewise I receive *diya* if a member of my sub-clan is killed by another

clan. This is in accordance with to the traditional *xeer* of the Digil and Mirifle people.

As an elder of Luway sub-clan, I have participated in five major peace processes including the Idaale land ownership dispute, a power sharing conflict in Dinsor District council, a clan conflict over grazing land in Wajid district and a dispute over power sharing in the administration between competing wings of the Rahanweyn Resistance Army (RRA).

What is the traditional role of Somali elders in peacemaking?

When elders receive reports of impending conflicts involving two clans, they organize the selection of suitable elders and dispatch them to the site. Often elders are not from the clans engaged in the fighting. Through an informal negotiation process, elders bring representatives of the fighting clans to a negotiation tree or to any other environment conducive to talks and mediation. If need arises religious leaders are brought into the mediation process as they carry moral authority.

The traditional role of Somali elders in peacemaking is to impose sanctions on any group or individuals who oppose the peace process. This can be by fining those groups or individuals who violate the peace, and punishing collectively those who refuse to sit in peace negotiations to solve their conflict through dialogue rather than by violence. It is also common in the Digil and Mirifle community to confiscate the assets of people who violate the peace.

How has the elders' role changed over the past 20 years?

The role of elders has been challenged over the years, particularly during the civil war. But elders still remain powerful social forces that cannot be ignored. Every authority who has taken over the Digil and Mirifle regions has tried to limit our authority but none of them has succeeded.

What qualities does an elder need to be good peacemaker?

To be a good peacemaker an elder should be a religious man who practices Islamic *Shari'a*, well respected in the Digil and Mirifle community, impartial, honest and a good decision maker. He should be knowledgeable of *xeer*. He also needs good communication skills and the capacity to engage with people outside his own sub-clan.

What are the key elements that can contribute to a successful Somali-led peace process?

I strongly believe that peace cannot be sustained without the involvement and the endorsement of the elders. To be successful a peace process needs to give more opportunity for important stakeholders in the community to participate. These people will bring fresh ideas to the peace process.

It is also important to reduce the influence of external actors. The cost of peace processes should be reduced. It is also important to allow enough time to discuss fundamental issues.

Why do peace processes sometimes fail?

Failure of peace processes can be the result of many factors. Among the most important are that too much money is spent. Peace cannot be bought. Peace conferences have generally failed to address fundamental issues of reconciliation. This should include acceptance of guilt, forgiveness, tolerance and divulging the truth about past atrocities. How can we reach peace if we do not address important issues that brought about the conflict in the first place?

The top-down approach that is used in all Somali national peace processes has contributed to failure. Most of them are held outside the country and look for a quick fix solution rather than responding to the real conflict. There is a lack of continuity and consistency.

Most Somali peace processes are poorly organized and managed and they lack the fundamental base for the peace process. Most lack legitimacy in the eyes of the constituencies they represent, although this can also occur in local peace processes. The limited engagement or the absence of traditional elders is the

major contribution to failure. Also there is an absence of strong authority to reinforce the agreements that can be reached.

None of the internationally-sponsored peace processes have brought sustainable peace or a functional government. What do you think the reasons for this are?

I think about this every day. Why cannot the Somali problem be resolved once and for all? It appears to me that despite the international community expending time and money on Somali peace processes, none of this has produced any viable institutions.

Everyone wants to become president without putting the country first. And it seems like the outside world also supports a short cut. Somali leaders often put their personal interest before the national interest. The organizers of peace processes have not had enough knowledge of the Somali culture and the real root causes of Somali conflict.

We Somali people have needed a government. But the outcomes of those peace processes have not reflected the voices of the Somali community. They have reflected the need of the organizers. Most of them believed that the accommodation of those with guns in leadership positions could bring a solution. This has not worked so far.

I would also like to point out the lack of political and financial support from the international community for the outcome of Somali peace processes.

How could elders contribute to national reconciliation?

Traditional elders could contribute to Somali national reconciliation if they were given a chance and their voices could be heard. Good examples are the regional administrations of Puntland and Somaliland, where traditional elders made it possible to bring sustainable peace and stability. In Bay and Bakool we play an active role in the establishment of the local administration and maintaining peace in the absence of authorities.

What is your vision for the complete recovery of the Somali region in terms of peace, stability and statehood?

If conflict resolution starts at the grassroots level and through a bottom-up approach, Somalia will be able to recover from the current crisis. I strongly believe that Somalia will get peace. The difficulties we are seeing today will serve as an experience for a future Somalia. I am optimistic that a better Somalia is coming, although may be slowly.

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Interview conducted by the Center for Research and Dialogue.