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Somalia's Elections and Clan Politics: a new opportunity or a temporary ceasefire?

by
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Introduction

On the 14 October 2004, Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed¹ was sworn in as the President of Somalia² at a colourful ceremony in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi. This event was a culmination of 13 years of civil war that brought a return to normalcy and civility to this country on the Horn of Africa. The ceremony, probably the first inauguration of a president outside his country, was graced by no less than ten African Heads of State.³ In the previous week Yusuf Ahmed had been elected by a 275-member Interim Parliament sitting in Kenya by garnering 189 votes against Dr Abdullahi Adow⁴, a former diplomat and cabinet minister in Barre's last government, who got 79 votes in a run-off.

With the end of the euphoria surrounding this historic event, the major task that lies ahead for the new Head of State is how to rebuild Somalia, a country that has been battered politically, socially and economically over the past decade. This article will address one of the key issues which the new government will have to confront: the culture of clan allegiance and against this, it assesses two possible outcomes of the recent elections in Somalia. This election suggests a new beginning for Somalia and provides an opportunity for healing and reconstruction of the country and society;

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¹ Yusuf has been a fixture in the political life of Somalia since he led an unsuccessful tribal revolt and coup against Siad Barre, the aftermath which was bloody and costly to his Darod clan as a result of retaliation from Barre's regime.

² This is a country that excludes the internationally unrecognised republics of Somaliland and Puntland (former Somalia territories). Yusuf Ahmed is also the president of Somaliland.

³ They included presidents Kibaki of Kenya, Obasanjo of Nigeria (also the current Chair of the African Union), Kagame of Rwanda, Museveni of Uganda, Ndayizeye of Burundi, Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti, Abdallah Salleh of Yemen, South Africa's Deputy Vice-President Jacob Zuma, Tanzania's Prime Minister Frederick Sumaye and the Sudanese Vice-President Osman Taha. Other senior dignitaries included the Secretary-General of the Arab League Amir Musa and the Deputy-President of the African Union Patrick Mazimhaka, to name but a few.

⁴ Adow hails from the Marehan clan and has the support of part of the former Barre regime.