

## **Somalia: a rebel paradise?**

A lot has been written, and will in all likelihood continue to be written about Somalia. The word, Somalia, has become synonymous with warlords, state collapse/failure, protracted internal conflict, displacement of people, and starvation.

Regardless of all the similes one can draw with the name of the country, the fact remains that accurate information on the movements, leaders, and issues which drive the conflict(s) there remain at best obscure, and at worst infused with, or, presented from points of view that sometimes obscure more than what it actually manages to reveal. This article will focus on current prominent leaders and active rebel movements in the country.

### **I Prominent individuals**

1. Sheikh Sharief Sheikh Ahmed – current elected president
2. Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys – prominent leader of Hizbul-Islami & Al-Shabaab

### **II Background**

Sheikh Sharief Sheikh Ahmed and Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys were leaders of the *Union of Islamic Courts* (UIC) which took control of Mogadishu in 2006. Subsequent to the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia (2006), and the deployment of the AU – AMISOM – mission in the country, they created the *Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia* (ARS).

The ARS alliance was created as an umbrella organisation under which the UIC and other organisations did battle with the warlords, Transitional Federal Government (TFG), Ethiopian forces, and the AU peacekeeping mission in Mogadishu and much of **Southern Somalia**.

### **III Recent developments**

At the end of 2008 the Somali parliament voted Sheikh Sharief Sheikh Ahmed in as president. This led to the break-up of both the UIC and the ARS with Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys now leading the cause of both the **Al-Shabaab** and **Hizbul-Islami** movements in their fight with the new government of Sheikh Sharief.

One important fact to keep in mind when considering the power base of Sheikh Dahir Aweys, is that he has been a prominent role-player in Somali politics since the 1970s. During the Somali-Ethiopian war in the Ogaden, Sheikh Dahir Aweys became famous as a popular leader. He is also a member of one of Mogadishu's most powerful clans.

Although **Al-Shabaab** and **Hizbul-Islami** do not mobilise their forces directly in response to access to resources (unlike the **Ogaden National Liberation Front** (ONLF)

in Ethiopia), it can be said that the key target of these rebel movements remain control of the government, which holds the key to not only political power, but also control over the economy.

Given the fragmentation of Somalia's territory, and the associated social fragmentation following on years of conflict, clan allegiance, rebel movements, and warlords (still present in the Somali parliament) remain the main channels through which families and individuals can access means of economic survival.

#### **IV Al-Shabaab and Hizbul-Islami**

One thing that is not clear about the current conflict between the Somali government and these rebel movements concern the ultimate objective of their struggle. Are these movements only striving to take control of the government and introduce a strict Islamic government based on Sharia law, or, are there other factors that motivate their struggle?

In terms of the first question, Sheikh Sharief Sheikh Ahmed, has made it clear that his government will not only respect Islamic Law, but that, as reported by the Shabelle Media Network in February of this year, he is ready to implement Islamic Law in the country. These reassurances have not satisfied leaders in the rebel movements, but, as will be noted below, the issue of Islam may not be the sole objection they have against the current government.

The **Al-Shabaab** and **Hizbul-Islami** movements are mobilised on the logic of making Sharia Law the basis of law and the functioning of the government. Given the close link between Sheikh Sharief and Sheikh Dahir Aweys when they were leaders of the UIC, one would think that there should not be a major difference between them that can lead to a continuation of the war. Yet, information forthcoming from sources in the Somali Association of South Africa, indicate that two other factors should be kept in mind when trying to understand the rift between the new Somali government and the rebels, these being:

1. The fact that Sheikh Sharief was elected president by the Somali parliament, is perceived by the rebels as a sign that he has capitulated to the power of the warlords in the Somali parliament. One should remember that the main goal of the UIC in 2006 was to remove the warlords from Mogadishu, and to crush the TFG which had a cabinet composed mostly of warlords active in the capital city at the time;

2. The presence in Somalia of outside forces, firstly Ethiopia – until its recent withdrawal; and secondly the AU peacekeeping force still in the country, is seen as a major obstacle to any form of reconciliation by the rebel forces. Part of the reason for the rejection of the AU force in Somalia by the rebels is that when it was deployed in the country, it was seen as a means to justify the Ethiopian invasion of the country. The AU force, its presence, and activities are therefore seen as unwarranted interference that should be rejected. These two reasons form the basis of the major split in the ARS, and the break-up of the UIC.

Historically it is important to note that the UIC consisted, at its creation, of twelve different groups which joined forces to defeat the TFG. Sheikh Sharief, although he was a prominent leader of the UIC, commanded only a small portion of the fighters and groups allied to the UIC. When he signed the peace deal with the TFG which paved the way for him to be elected as president, the bulk of the remaining UIC forces under the leadership of Sheikh Dahir Aweys broke away and regrouped to continue fighting their former ally-now turned enemy – Sheikh Sharief. This split in the ARS and UIC has led to the recent spike in violence and fighting in the capital city and other parts of the country.

## **V International assumptions and questions**

The long-running conflict in Somalia has had adverse effects not only in terms of the dire humanitarian situation in the country, but additionally it poses tremendous policy challenges to regional- and international powers.

If the internal reaction to the deployment of AU and Ethiopian troops in the country is anything to go by, this reaction should be taken as a warning by any country or organisation considering the deployment of military forces in the Somalia.

An already fragile region can be fragmented even further if international powers are to decide to send troops into the country to stabilise the situation. International military interventions in Somalia has already proven disastrous, especially if one recalls the fated "Black Hawk Down" incident during the early 1990s.

However irreconcilable the divisions in Somalia seem to be, it is also true that the rebels currently opposed to the government of Sheikh Sharief also harbors a strong element of **Somali nationalists**. Such individuals sees the Ogaden, home to approximately 4 million ethnic Somalis under Ethiopian control, as an integral part of an integrated Somalia. This is a matter of grave concern for regional powers, especially Ethiopia and Kenya.