

Analysis: Somali Reform Rush May Be Militant Lifeline
By Reuters, The New York Times
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LONDON (Reuters) - Weakened on the battlefield, Somalia's al Shabaab militants may yet survive, and even prosper from, a reinvigorated Western and African push to rebuild arguably the world's most deeply war-damaged nation.

But if there is a future for the radical Islamists, it won't be thanks to the merger they announced on February 9 with al Qaeda, the militant network in disarray a decade on from the September 11 attacks following a remorseless U.S. counter-terrorism campaign.

Instead, their fate depends on internal political struggles that have little to do with the West's fight against militancy or even with the multinational drive against pirate communities believed to have tactical tie-ups with some in the insurgency.

The group's prospects, analysts say, will gain in proportion to the degree of clan conflict stirred by the creation of a successor to the weak interim government, a task that must be done before its mandate expires just six short months from now.

Somalia's nine million people are composed of dozens of clans and sub-clans, many with a history of armed rivalry over land, political power and businesses during 20 years of war.

Those communities left out of any administration hastily cobbled together to succeed the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) may resort to force to stake their claim to power, and al Shabaab may be waiting in the wings to offer them support.

Others with vested commercial interests in turmoil may also turn spoiler, teaming up with disaffected communities to prolong the inter-clan conflict that has ravaged the country ever since the overthrow of dictator Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991.

"In my experience in Somalia you never want to be playing against the clock," said veteran Somalia expert Ken Menkhaus, a political science professor at Davidson College, North Carolina.

BAD RESULTS

"We know for a fact that rushing processes produces bad results," he said in interview. "This very accelerated end of transition process is going to face a lot of very critical decisions about representation and ultimately about who rules. That will create unhappiness and some of the Somalis who are unhappy will defect (from the process).

In a country full of young men with guns, and in urban areas few jobs apart from robbery and extortion, opportunities for stoking political mayhem are plentiful.

Whether al Shabaab endures or fades into history is a matter of high importance for its Western and African foes, who view it as a terrorism threat and a cause, along with a host of lesser clan militias, of the poverty and chaos in which piracy thrives.

The TFG has said hundreds of foreign fighters have joined the insurgency from countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Gulf and Western nations such as the United States and Britain.

The Islamists have launched cross-border raids into Kenya and have threatened Kenya, Uganda and Burundi with major attacks if the troops they have sent to fight al Shabaab do not leave.

Many Somalis, too, say they would like an end to the group, likened by some to the Taliban for its zealous persecution of individuals deemed pro-Western and to Cambodia's Khmer Rouge in its taste for radical, agrarian-based self-sufficiency.

The group earned widespread criticism in Somalia for impeding the flow of international emergency food aid to famine-struck communities in 2011. Some of the many nationalists who flocked to its banner during an earlier Ethiopian incursion have deserted it, disenchanted by its actions during the famine.

But experts say al Shabaab may well spy opportunity in the peace process backed by the West, recalling that Somalia's war has sometimes seen peace efforts fail when militias feel left out and resort to the gun or build a new set of alliances.

A notable example of thwarted clan ambition was Mohamed Farah Aideed, a general who helped bring down Siad Barre and whose goal of becoming president stirred a power struggle that helped to accelerate Somalia's descent into chaos.

WORST CASE SCENARIO

Aideed's militiamen fought U.S. forces in a celebrated 1993 battle, portrayed in the Hollywood film "Black Hawk Down" and widely remembered as a humiliating defeat by Washington.

For now, with the international community's fight against al Shabaab dominating the political landscape, clan infighting may seem a remote prospect.

After all, the insurgents are being weakened, relinquishing ground to African Union troops around the Somali capital, Mogadishu, and losing territory to Kenyan and Ethiopian forces in parts of southern and central Somalia. The lucrative al Shabaab-held port of Kismayu is under threat from Kenyan forces.

But Menkhaus said a "worst case scenario" would see an effort by some TFG leaders, widely criticized for alleged graft, to manipulate the process so that they stayed in office.

The result, he said, might be that armed groups nominally allied to the TFG would turn against it, weakening the interim authorities and offering al Shabaab possible new allies.

"What that points to is that we shouldn't be fixated on al Shabaab," said Menkhaus.

"We should be fixated on armed rejectionists of any type, because what will happen is that the groups that are very unhappy with whatever political dispensation emerges will put up resistance. They will try to spoil the process."

Afyare A. Elmi, Assistant Professor, International Affairs Department at Qatar University, said the scenario of spoilers complaining of a lack of inclusiveness "is plausible."

He is among several analysts who see the West presiding over a security-driven approach that gives more importance to armed pressure against al Shabaab than to patient efforts to win consent from the country's many clans for a rebuilt state.

"The process overseen by the U.N. will merely recycle the current politicians and prolong the status quo," he told Reuters.

Suspicion that the TFG, too, favors a security approach over consensus building hardened last week when TFG Prime Minister Abdiweli Mohamed Ali said on the sidelines of an international conference on Somalia that he would welcome targeted air strikes against al Shabaab.

The To Do list Somali politicians have set themselves is long. By August 20 they must complete plans for constitutional and parliamentary reform and hold indirect presidential polls.

THE SOUND OF BULLETS

A similar Kenyan-hosted agreement clinched in 2004 took two years of talks, punctuated by numerous walk-outs and rows.

There is particular concern that international forces may fumble a long-planned assault on Kismayu port, a key al Shabaab income generator, if clans are left out of any successor local administration and fight to gain a share of tax revenue.

"I don't see any contingency planning for life in Kismayu as a liberated city, especially for the youth who've been actively involved with al Shabaab," Shukri Gesod, a Somali youth activist, said in an interview.

"All they have known is the sound of bullets. If you're not offering help for them then you run the risk of failure. You can't cut corners when it comes to stability and peacekeeping."

Even those who detect signs of hope are guarded in their optimism.

Jabril Ibrahim Abdulle of Mogadishu's Center for Research and Dialogue, said that al Shabaab was widely hated and he could not foresee it "getting any support, in part because of their ruthless killing of innocent Somalis."

"However, in the event the current political process ... fails to meet people's expectations, a new alliance composed of a cocktail of religious groups and warlords may emerge."

(Reporting by William Maclean, editing by Peter Millership)

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