

HUMILIATION IN THE CONTEXT OF RECENT EVENTS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

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Abstract

The Horn of Africa is known for its enormous capacity to evolve and brutally deploy political, social, cultural, and economic systems and traditions tailor-made for colonialism, oppression, exploitation and domination. Deeply embedded in these systems has been a culture of humiliation used mostly by the privileged and powerful to publicly and brutally humiliate individuals, families, communities, nations or countries perceived or conveniently branded as enemies. All the peoples in the Horn of Africa have, in varying degrees and at different times, suffered the ravages of systematic and relentless humiliation. Humiliation as conceptualized and practiced in the Horn of Africa has been as diverse as its perpetrators and victims, and has also been partly a function of the state-of-affairs prevailing in the region at any particular time. Brutal military occupations, desecration and/or destruction of religious institutions and symbols, forced religious conversions, slavery, reigns of terror, execution of prominent figures and parading of victims' bodies and denying them timely and descent burial, rape and other forms of sexual abuse/violence, demonization and persecution of entire ethnic groups, destruction and looting of the economic assets and livelihoods of opponents, and occupation and annexation of territory have been used to humiliate opponents, rivals and enemies within and between states, nations, and ethnic and religious groups in the Horn of Africa since the 16th century. More importantly, a wide range of external powers has played an important, and at times a decisive, role in perpetuating and underpinning the cultures of domination and humiliation deeply rooted in the

political culture of the state and social systems in the Horn of Africa: Portugal during the 16th century, Ottoman Empire, Western colonial powers during the 'Scramble for Africa', the allied powers during and after the Second World War, the US and Soviet Union in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980's, and the US in the 1990s and more recently in 2006-2007.

The rise and brutal routinization of humiliation has inevitably led to a passionate, even pathological, desire for revenge, resulting in the protracted and bloody conflicts and large-scale and recurrent humanitarian crises with which the Horn of Africa has become synonymous.

The invasion and occupation of Somalia by Ethiopia on the eve of Christmas 2006, constitutes the latest and arguably most lethal form of humiliation perpetrated against any country in the Horn of Africa, and for that matter elsewhere in the world. In a speech to the Africa Union meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on 28 January 2007, the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, described the Ethiopian occupation of Somalia as 'humiliation'.¹ Mr. Mbeki's assessment has been echoed by many keen and informed observers well versed with the history and politics of the Horn of Africa, particularly the root causes of the troubled relationship between Ethiopia and Somalia. It's perhaps the Somalis themselves that have given the most accurate assessment of the type, depth and intensity of the humiliation they have suffered as a result of the invasion and occupation of their country coupled with the deafening silence and indifference of the international community. Most Somalis believe that what they are suffering are multiple humiliations, deeply insulting and brutalizing their multiple identities and core traditions that form the foundation of the Somali equation: Clan system, Islam, Somali nationalism, and Somali state. The passion for revenge and preparations

¹ Somalia Needs African Solidarity, speech by Thabo Mbeki 28 January 2007

for a long and bloody struggle against Ethiopia are already evident across many parts of Somalia and beyond.

In this presentation, I will examine in detail the multiple humiliations imposed on the Somalis by Ethiopia, the reaction of the Somalis and its implications for the two countries and the Horn of Africa. I will also put forward suggestions for bringing about just and enduring peace in the conflict-ridden and conflict-prone Horn of Africa, focusing on the understanding of the culture of humiliation as an obstacle to an enduring peace in the region.