

BOOK REVIEWS

Ahmed I. Samatar. *Socialist Somalia: Rhetoric and Reality*. London and New Jersey: Zed Books, Ltd., 1988. 186 pp. US\$ 15.95

This important and stimulating book offers the best available introduction to the historical experience and present status of Somalia. In a field hitherto largely dominated by various forms of Orientalist discourse and modernization theory, the author has imposed categories of analysis commensurate with those generally employed in discussion of the political economy of the wider world; for this reason alone *Socialist Somalia* constitutes a benchmark in Somali Studies. Moreover, the book is also noteworthy for the perception and skill with which the author has integrated valuable insights drawn from the works of previous scholars into his masterful synthesis. While not everyone may necessarily agree with all the author's views with regard to the recent course of political events, all may appreciate the balanced and generous spirit with which his arguments have been developed, and no one can afford to dismiss them.

The first half of the book sets the historical stage for the coup by socialists (as understood locally) in 1969. Chapter 1, "The Process of Induction," presents an overview of some basic realities of the productive systems of precolonial Somalia, and delineates briefly but with clarity the historical articulation between these activities and impinging foreign interests up to the close of the nineteenth century. Chapter 2, "Proto-Nationalism and the Somali Response," discusses the role of religious and national sentiments, as well as concrete experience, in the forging of a modern Somali identity, particularly during the decades of armed resistance to alien invaders that embraced the turn of the present century. Chapter 3, entitled "Nationalism: The Rise of the Petite Bourgeoisie," interprets the colonial period in terms of the rise to prominence of mercantile and bureaucratic elites in the British and Italian territories, elites who gradually gave form to a renewed movement for Somali unity and independence, but on their own terms. What followed the victory of these elites from independence to 1969 forms the burden of Chapter 4; the author finds this age to be one of frustration and anger among the contentious and self-interested elite, in which both the tangible manifestations of the initial manifestations of the initial post-independence wave of international good will and the political possibilities inherent in a formally open political system were squandered or misdirected to unworthy ends.

The second half of the book treats the period of socialist rule since the coup of 1969. Chapters 5 and 6 respectively discuss efforts to achieve internal and external reconstruction up to the war of 1977-78. Internally, the government is given credit for adopting a standard orthography and dramatically advancing literacy, for curtailing abuses involving clan loyalties, for taking some steps to improve the status of

women, and for realistic and competent management of the drought of 1974-75. However, these early accomplishments were dimmed by economic policies that left the demographically preponderant pastoral sector to the tender mercies of bourgeois livestock exporters and patronized agricultural and industrial schemes that ranged from lackluster to disastrous, by the flight en masse of professionals and technicians, by the alienation of religious leaders and, above all, by the decline of political leadership into pompous authoritarianism. Externally, the new government did not hesitate to plunge Somalia ever-deeper into debt to foreign creditors. A foreign policy of "positive non-alignment" alienated the United States and its allies, while drawing Somalia into an increasing dependence upon the Soviet bloc. Whatever the merits of such an orientation might be under other circumstances, eventually this dependence left Somalia painfully vulnerable to the effects of the superpowers' dramatic diplomatic volte-face that followed the Ethiopian revolution. Chapter 7, "The War and After," argues that a more adept leadership might well have accepted Soviet and Cuban mediation offers, thus preserving initial Somali battlefield gains (notably the occupation of the Haud and the Ogaden) rather than pressing for a definitive military decision with Ethiopia which the farsighted might well have foreseen to be very probably negative. Defeat was followed by harsh repression and a cynical and opportunistic rush to embrace the United States. The decade since the war discussed in Chapter 8, has seen the progressive demoralization of civic life, the disintegration of the economic system to the level of a "basket case" (p.154), and the further degeneration of military authoritarianism into a corrupt and odious "malignant autocracy" (p. 157).

In conclusion, the author suggests that a national rehabilitation for Somalia is possible. It would require respect for the limitations of a beautiful but harsh environment, participatory democracy, competent and community-minded leadership, a limited and realistic program of economic development, cooperation with neighboring lands, and avoidance of superpower clientage. He holds that this goal may be achieved not via the precipitation of apocalyptic events, but rather, through the wise and patient labor of many hands.

The major limitation of this book is its brief format. The argumentation is compact in composition, at point almost gnomic, and the heavy hand of a cost-conscious editor is visible throughout. This reviewer felt that a number of issues raised deserved fuller exposition, and it is much to be hoped that the author may find occasion to express himself at greater length on future occasions.

Jay Spaulding