

# ‘THAT IS WHY WE HAVE TROUBLES’: THE *PRO-ITALIA* MOVEMENT’S CHALLENGE TO NATIONALISM IN BRITISH-OCCUPIED SOMALIA(1946–9)\*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Postwar politics in British-occupied Somalia is usually reduced to the activities of the Somali Youth League, the foremost anticolonial nationalist movement. However, by 1947, smaller associations, pejoratively nicknamed the *pro-Italia*, came together in an effort to return Somalia to Italy under international mandate. Drawing upon new archival sources, the article argues that this movement did not stem from arguments supporting colonial rule, but rather from objections to the nationalist agenda and military occupation. Closer attention to these voices sheds light on the deeper meanings of political alignment during the change of regime and enhances our understanding of political developments in postwar Somalia.

## Key Words

Somalia, decolonization, nationalism, colonial policy, United Nations.

On 23 January 1948, Abuker Hussein, a mason and political activist residing in Mogadishu, asked a special commission of inquiry of the United Nations (UN), the Four Powers Commission, to return Somalia to Italy under international mandate. Since the defeat of the Italians in 1941, the former colony had been placed under temporary British Military Administration (BMA). The end of Italy’s oppressive regime spurred the emergence of a series of self-help and socially-oriented associations, especially in Somalia’s capital, Mogadishu. Their activism received a further boost when a debate in the UN raised the possibility of self-government and independence for the former Italian

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<sup>1</sup> With the term Somalia, this article refers to the former Italian colony *Somalia Italiana* and, by 1950, to the region under trust administration. With the term Somaliland, it indicates the former protectorate of British Somaliland and the *de facto* Republic of Somaliland. As the period under examination precedes the creation of the official script of the Somali language – completed in 1972 – names of Somalis are reported as found in the sources. Names of places and localities are written according to the Somali spelling, with the exception of Mogadishu. Names of interviewees are reported according to their choices.

colonies.<sup>2</sup> In order to make an informed decision on the country's future, the UN delegated the Four Powers Commission to visit Somalia and investigate the aspirations of local communities.

When Abuker Hussein testified before the UN in 1948, Somalia's capital was in turmoil. A few days earlier, violent clashes had taken place in Mogadishu because members of Italian and Somali communities sabotaged a demonstration organized by a nationalist movement, the Somali Youth League (SYL).<sup>3</sup> Although the Commission did not investigate these clashes, it concluded that they were caused by a tense competition between two different political fronts. One of these fronts was the SYL, the foremost political organization of its kind, whose activities were not merely confined to Somalia, but extended to Somaliland, Ethiopia, and Kenya. The SYL opposed the possibility of returning Somalia to Italy and campaigned for the unification of Somali-speaking regions into a Greater Somalia, a project originally launched by British Foreign Minister Bevin in 1946.<sup>4</sup> The rival front was the *Conferenza per la Somalia*, an umbrella organization financed by the Italian government that grouped together seven smaller associations – most notably the Patriotic Benefit Union (PBU) and the Hizbia Digil and Mirifle (HDM). These associations claimed to mainly represent the towns and regions of southern Somalia.<sup>5</sup> When interrogated by the Commission, the associations spoke in favour of Italian rule and were henceforth nicknamed *pro-Italia*. Their backing of the Italians contributed to the restoration of Italian rule under a ten-year UN trusteeship in 1950.

The Four Powers' delegates, who convened in Mogadishu in 1948, were preoccupied with determining which power would take over Somalia's administration amid the emerging conflicts of the Cold War. If Somali testimonies also reflected similar considerations, their decision to take part in the international dispute over Somalia had little to do with the Four Powers' concerns. Despite backing Italy's claims, Abuker Hussein and other Somali activists did not explain their stance in terms of support of colonial rule, but rather placed their choice against the backdrop of regime change, the resulting power vacuum and the rise and diffusion of the SYL. Representatives of the *pro-Italia* were not convinced that the project of Greater Somalia was the best path forward for Somalia's future and, more generally, that the SYL, accused of acting as a state within the state, was entitled to speak on behalf of *all* Somali communities. As Abuker Hussein put it: 'Here, in this place, wherever is a British Officer, next to him there is a Somali Youth League member

2 On the international debate on former Italian colonies, see G. P. Calchi Novati, 'La sistemazione delle colonie italiane dell'Africa orientale e i condizionamenti della guerra fredda', in A. Del Boca (ed.), *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo* (Bari, 1991), 519–50; S. Kelly, *Cold War in the Desert: Britain, the United States and the Italian Colonies, 1945–52* (London, 2000); and G. Rossi, *L'Africa italiana verso l'indipendenza (1941–1949)* (Milano, 1980).

3 On these clashes, see G. P. Calchi Novati, 'Gli incidenti di Mogadiscio del gennaio 1948: rapporti italo-inglesi e nazionalismo somalo', *Africa* (Rome), 3–4 (1980), 327–55; and A. Varsori, *Il diverso declino di due potenze coloniali: gli eventi di Mogadiscio del gennaio 1948 e i rapporti anglo-italiani* (Roma, 1981).

4 The project of Greater Somalia called for the unification of Somali-inhabited regions in the Horn of Africa: *Somalia Italiana*, British Somaliland, *Côte Française des Somalis*, the Ogaden, the Haud and Reserved Areas, and Kenya's Northern Frontier District. See S. Touval, *Somali Nationalism: International Politics and the Drive for Unity in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge, MA, 1963), 61–100.

5 These were: the Abgal Youth Association, the Bimal Union, the HDM, the Hidaier al Islam Shidle and Mobilen, the PBU, the Somalia Progressive Committee, and the Union of Africans in Somalia.

either as a clerk or as a boy, a personal servant or as an interpreter, and that is why we have troubles.<sup>6</sup> Although very little is known about *pro-Italia* voices, an appreciation of their activities, the tensions that arose and shaped the entire spectrum of associations within Somalia will be crucial in understanding the postwar situation.

By supporting Italy in 1948, the *pro-Italia* associations crucially affected terms and modes of Somalia's decolonization. However, as they were negatively associated with the former colonial rulers, the successive postcolonial regimes discarded their contribution to Somalia's path to independence.<sup>7</sup> Concurrently, their voices received little attention from an earlier generation of scholars of Somalia, who instead focused on features and activities of the majority nationalist party, the SYL.<sup>8</sup> In many ways, this neglect reflects broader trends that characterize the historiographies of colonial Africa. As underlined by Aristide Zolberg as early as 1966, research on African politics suffered from the fact that scholars concentrated on large and dominant political organizations, often underestimating the importance of minority associations.<sup>9</sup> In addition, early studies on Somalia reflected contemporary concerns of analyzing, assisting, and justifying the emergence of nationalism and nation-states in Africa.<sup>10</sup> This predominant historiographic focus on nationalism was also accompanied by a tendency to approach Somali politics through the paradigm of agnation, commonly defined as a clan system, which rested at the foundation of Somali society. Accordingly, the clan system, with its centrifugal and centripetal features, was seen as shaping and informing both nationalist and more 'sectarian' politics.<sup>11</sup> Although this approach highlighted certain patterns within Somali society, it also produced a rather reductive take on local politics. Hence, the formation of the *pro-Italia* movement was framed as a clan-based reaction to the SYL and more specifically a reflection of traditional cleavages between agro-pastoral and pastoral communities.<sup>12</sup>

Admittedly, historiographies of Somali studies have been widely revised over the last two decades and these debates have questioned the role played by the clan system in Somalia's recent political developments *vis-à-vis* the impact of socioeconomic changes taking place in the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> Yet if new historical research on postwar politics is growing,

6 The National Archives, Kew, Richmond (TNA) Foreign Office (FO) 1015/28, C.F.M./D/L/47/L.C.COM., 'Tenth hearing in Italian Somaliland', Mogadishu, 23 Jan. 1948.

7 M. S. Barre, *My Country and My People: The Collected Speeches; 1971–1972* (Mogadishu, 1982).

8 A. Castagno, 'Somali republic', in J. S. Coleman and C. G. Rosberg (eds.), *Political Parties and National Integration in Tropical Africa* (Berkeley, 1964), 512–58; I. M. Lewis, 'Modern political movements in Somaliland, I', *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, 28:3 (1958), 244–61; Touval, *Somali*, 61–84.

9 A. R. Zolberg, *Creating Political Order: The Party-States of West Africa* (Chicago, 1966), 9.

10 See, for example, D. D. Laitin and S. S. Samatar, *Somalia: Nation in Search of a State* (Boulder, CO, 1987).

11 Touval, *Somali*, 85.

12 Castagno, 'Somali', 523–4.

13 A. J. Ahmed (ed.), *The Invention of Somalia* (Lawrenceville, NJ, 1995). For a historiographical review of Somali Studies, see M. V. Hoehne and V. Luling, 'Introduction: Lewis and the remaining challenges in Somali Studies', in M. V. Hoehne and V. Luling (eds.), *Milk and Peace, Drought and War: Somali Culture, Society and Politics: Essays in Honour of I. M. Lewis* (London, 2010), 1–15; and L. Kapteijns, 'The disintegration of Somalia: a historiographical essay', *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, 1 (2001), 11–52.

scholarly focus on nationalism still predominates.<sup>14</sup> What is more, novel studies on the critical phase of Somalia's decolonization and the interaction between Somali activists and colonial rule have either concentrated on the latter dimension or on reinterpreting existing scholarship under a different theoretical framework.<sup>15</sup> Thus, there remains an urgent need to further scrutinize the postwar period. As Frederick Cooper noted, pre-independence politics in Africa should not be reduced to anticolonial or nationalist movements, as these 'were both smaller and larger than the nation, sometimes in creative tension with each other, sometimes in repressive antagonism'.<sup>16</sup>

Renewed attention to postwar politics would also require a critical examination of sources and biased narratives of the then-occupying power, the BMA. Early scholarship failed to historicize and problematize these sources (re)producing limited views of the Somali past. To be sure, this flaw can be partially ascribed to the scant and fragmented nature of archival materials that are often difficult to locate and access.<sup>17</sup> However, it also reveals a tendency to heavily, and often uncritically, rely on the BMA's official publications, whose main aim was to justify the occupation of the enemy's colonies and to present it as a liberal triumph over fascist oppression.<sup>18</sup> The notion that the British occupied Somalia in order to emancipate local communities still lingers in scholarly works. For example, consider the work of the established scholar of Somalia, Ioan M. Lewis, whose *A Modern History of the Somali* is to date the most comprehensive study of modern Somali history. Although Lewis's scholarship has already come under a critical gaze, the issue of chosen sources and their underlying rhetoric demand additional consideration.<sup>19</sup> This is especially true for Lewis's account of British-occupied Somalia, which remains unequivocally wedded to wartime propaganda:

To understand the atmosphere in Somalia at this time [during the BMA], and the nature of the relations between British officials and Somali, it has to be remembered that the new rulers saw themselves as liberators from fascist oppression and to a considerable extent were so received. Indeed, the generally friendly reception accorded to them reinforced the Administration's tendency to regard the Somali as allies against the Italians. And many British officials made no secret of their

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- 14 C. Barnes, 'The Somali Youth League, Ethiopian Somalis and the Greater Somalia idea, circa 1946–48', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 1:2 (2007), 277–91; S. Aidid, 'Haweenku wa garab (women are a force): women and the Somali nationalist movement, 1943–1960', *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, 10 (2011), 103–24. See also L. Kapteijns, 'Discourse on moral womanhood in Somali popular songs, 1960–1990', *The Journal of African History*, 50 (2009), 101–22.
- 15 On Italy's late colonial rule, see A. M. Morone, *L'ultima colonia: come l'Italia è tornata in Africa 1950–1960* (Bari, 2011); and P. Tripodi, *The Colonial Legacy in Somalia: Rome and Mogadishu: from Colonial Administration to Operation Restore Hope* (New York, 1999). On new interpretation of existing scholarship, see M. Issa-Salwe, *The Collapse of the Somali State: The Impact of the Colonial Legacy* (London, 1996).
- 16 F. Cooper, 'Conflict and connection: rethinking colonial African history', *The American Historical Review*, 99:5 (1994), 15–19.
- 17 On the limited archival sources, see Barnes, 'The Somali', 288, fn. 64; L. Cassanelli, 'The partition of knowledge in Somali Studies: reflections on Somalia's fragmented intellectual heritage', *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, 9 (2011), 5–7; and R. L. Hess, *Italian Colonialism in Somalia* (Chicago & London, 1966), 214–15.
- 18 K. C. Gandar Dower, *The First to Be Freed: The Record of British Military Administration in Eritrea and Somalia, 1941–1943* (London, 1944).
- 19 For different critiques of Lewis's scholarship, see Hoehne and Luling, 'Introduction'.

admiration for Somalis and contempt for the defeated Italians. Hence there was from the beginning a considerable bond of sympathy between the rulers and the Somali public, which, in the liberal currents of opinion of the times, found expression in a strong and quite explicit pro-Somali policy.<sup>20</sup>

By conferring upon the BMA the role of ally and liberator of Somali communities, a more critical engagement with the military occupation was hindered and the possibility that parts of Somali communities were less keen or submissive to British rule conveniently forgotten.<sup>21</sup> As this also contributed to perpetuating a sense of shame that was associated with the *pro-Italia*'s backing of former colonial masters, it is not surprising that research on postwar minority associations defensively denied this collaboration.<sup>22</sup> This becomes all the more problematic because echoes of wartime stereotypes still resonate in contemporary literature today. Bearing the stigma of having favoured the return of Somalia to Italy, the *pro-Italia* phenomenon has been recently portrayed as a corrupt movement, fuelled by bribes and Italian meddling.<sup>23</sup>

There is little doubt that Italian propaganda agents on the *Ministero dell'Africa Italiana*'s (MAI) payroll sought to bribe local organizations in order to promote their interests in the former colonies.<sup>24</sup> But by reducing the *pro-Italia* movement to these activities, the issue of support of former colonial rule is left unproblematised – as if part of Somali society had been inherently inclined to side with the Italians regardless of their views, local opportunities, and circumstances. Looking at this front as the by-product of Italian initiatives also fails to account for the longevity of some associations, as that of the HDM, whose activism continued long after the UN decided to return Somalia to Italy.<sup>25</sup> The question, then, is not whether Italy's attempts to further its position managed to amass forms of local support, but it is rather about the whys and wherefores of these dynamics.

Gramsci's notion of consent – the masses' acquiescent attitude to the direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group that enjoys a hegemonic position in the system of production – has been often adopted to investigate the dialectics of domination and resistance in colonial Africa.<sup>26</sup> Important studies, such as Glassman's *Feasts and Riots*,

20 I. M. Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa* (4th edn, Oxford, 2002), 120.

21 Controversially, Lewis adopted a similar perspective to discuss British rule in the neighbouring Protectorate of Somaliland. See C. Geshekte, 'Interview with Professor Ioan Lewis at his home in London', *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, 1 (2001), 58–9.

22 M. H. Mukhtar, 'The emergence and role of political parties in the inter-river regions of Somalia from 1947 to 1960', *Ufahamu*, 17:2 (1989), 78.

23 G. Prunier, 'Benign neglect versus *La Grande Somalia*: the colonial legacy and the post-colonial Somali state', in Hoehne and Luling (eds.), *Milk*, 44–5.

24 A. Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa orientale: nostalgia delle colonie* (Bari, 1992), 201–305. For a comparison with Eritrea, see T. Negash, 'Italy and its relations with Eritrean political parties, 1948–1950', *Africa* (Rome), 59:3/4 (2004), 417–52.

25 The HDM fared particularly well in the 1956 national election. For details, see G. Natali, *Le prime elezioni politiche in Somalia: 1956* (Mogadishu, 1957).

26 A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere, Volume 1: Quaderni 1(XVI)–5(IX)* (Turin, 1975), 311–12, 443, and 476. See also, J. Femia, 'Hegemony and consciousness in the thought of Antonio Gramsci', *Political Studies*, 23:1 (1975), 32; J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume 1: Christianity, Colonialism*

have drawn attention to ways in which both dominant and subordinate groups contributed to the production of hegemonic ideologies, arguing that forms of consent do not necessarily serve the interests of the oppressor.<sup>27</sup> A similar perspective helps illuminate the motives behind the *pro-Italia* front. And the fact that these voices came together during the British occupation – at a time when Italian colonial power was not, conceptually speaking, hegemonic in the area – points to the necessity to move beyond the allegedly *pro-Italian* feature of the *pro-Italia* and further investigate the meanings of political alignment in postwar Somalia. What follows is an attempt to do so.

At the end of the Second World War, international discussions concerning Somalia's future, combined with British and Italian efforts to build local alliances for their competing hegemonic projects, compelled Somali activists to take sides. The launch of the Bevin Plan, which promoted the idea of Greater Somalia, spurred and galvanized the activities of the SYL and paved the way for a cooperation between the national party and the BMA. The PBU, the HDM, and other more recent associations engaged with Italy's initiatives in an attempt to antagonize the SYL. This process of political alignment compromised the image of Somali politics, drawing focus onto the existing hostility between international powers and the perceived tensions inherent to Somali society. Although the *pro-Italia* front ended up uniting activists claiming to represent the interests of semi-pastoral regions and clans of southern Somalia, this did not occur according to predetermined patterns. It was the agenda of the national party that was a significant bone of contention between different voices. *Pro-Italia* representatives argued that the programme of the SYL – a unified Greater Somalia with no clan based differences – would put land rights and access to resources, regulated by clan and regional belongings, at risk. Similar issues continued to inform politics in self-governing Somalia, resulting in a tense relation between the SYL and the opposition. But once the SYL gained power on the eve of independence, its governments managed to silence other parties and exclude them from parliamentary representation.

## THE UN DEBATE AND THE IDEA OF GREATER SOMALIA

During the discussions regarding the future of Italian colonies, the Big Powers' representatives, who were appointed to the Commission of Foreign Ministries, generally agreed that Somalia should be granted self-government via a new form of international mandate. These debates were preoccupied with establishing which power was best placed to lead Somalia to independence. Among other plans, Britain's Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin launched the idea to create a Greater Somalia to bring together most Somali-speaking regions under British trusteeship. As Bevin further elaborated before the House of Commons in 1946, the plan intended to give 'the poor nomads a chance to live' under a united country and Great Britain recognition for their victory over Italy's East Africa

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*and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, 1991), 21–31; D. Engels and S. Marks (eds.), *Contesting Colonial Hegemony: State and Society in Africa and India* (London, 1994), 1–53; S. Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison Wisconsin, 1990), 17–22, 31–4.

27 J. Glassman, *Feasts and Riots: Revelry, Rebellion and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856–1888* (Portsmouth, NH, 1995), 12–20.

Empire.<sup>28</sup> But the Bevin Plan was also in line with Italy's past attempts to redesign the spheres of influence in the Horn of Africa. After occupying Ethiopia, Italy had expanded Somalia's border limitations, annexing the Somali-speaking region of Ogaden. The War Office, in charge of British administration in the Horn of Africa, *de facto* maintained Italy's territorial adjustments until 1948.<sup>29</sup> As Cedric Barnes has argued, this demonstrated that the British believed that the future of the whole area remained 'implicitly bound up with the fate of the ex-Italian Somaliland'.<sup>30</sup> In this way, the idea of Greater Somalia remained a recurrent theme within British internal correspondence. This theme continued to influence their policymaking process in spite of the fact that the British government officially abandoned the Bevin Plan due to opposition from other Big Powers and Ethiopia.

In many ways, the launch of the idea of Greater Somalia had a long-lasting impact on political developments in Somali-speaking regions. British chief administrators – Brigadier Wickham in Somalia, Brigadier Fisher in Somaliland, and Colonel R. H. Smith in Ethiopia's Somali-speaking regions – had already contributed to drafting the proposal during wartime.<sup>31</sup> With the announcement of the Bevin Plan in 1946, they began to promote the idea locally.<sup>32</sup> If in wartime Somalia the BMA had shown little interest in local affairs, it later pursued a more direct engagement or a 'closer touch' with Somali communities.<sup>33</sup> One of the first changes occurred in early 1946, when the War Office instructed military authorities in Mogadishu to establish a series of district councils that would integrate customary representatives into the military administration.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, the BMA began to engage with Somali clubs that had emerged after Italy's oppressive regime came to an end. Originally based in Mogadishu, the largest associations were the SYL, founded as the Somali Youth Club, and the PBU, nicknamed *Jumiya*, both promoting mutual assistance and cooperation against the background of wartime shortages.<sup>35</sup> Their agendas aimed to enhance the local trade industry, severely hit by the war, and education policies that were largely neglected during Italian rule.<sup>36</sup> With the regime change, these associations also became providers of essential welfare systems.<sup>37</sup>

28 Quoted in Touval, *Somali*, 79–80.

29 J. Drysdale, *The Somali Dispute* (London, 1964), ch. 6, 63–76.

30 Barnes, 'The Somali', 279.

31 TNA FO 371/53526, F. R. W. Jameson, 'Administration of a Greater Somalia', Nairobi, 3 May 1946, ref. no. EAC/1996/1996/265/CA.

32 Drysdale, *The Somali*, 68.

33 TNA FO 1015/27, D. H. Wickham, 'Disorder in Mogadishu on 20 Aug. 1946', Mogadishu, 23 Aug. 1946, ref. no. 3456/23.

34 TNA FO 371/63220, H. Q. BMA, 'Advisory councils', Mogadishu, 17 Dec. 1946, ref. no. 3468/59; TNA FO 1015/90, D. H. Wickham, 'Annual report on the administration of Somalia – for the year ended 31 Dec. 1946'.

35 The nickname *Jumiya* was a reference to the religious settlements that had flourished in southern Somalia since the nineteenth century. M. Colucci, *Principi di diritto consuetudinario della Somalia italiana meridionale* (Florence, 1924), 82.

36 On the issue of education, see A. A. Castagno, 'Somali republic', in H. Kitchen (ed.), *The Educated African* (London, 1962), 87–107.

37 On sociopolitical activities in postwar Mogadishu, see L. Kapteijns and M. M. Boqor, 'Memories of a Mogadishu childhood, 1940–1964: Maryan Muuse Boqor and the women who inspired her', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 42:1 (2009), 110.

In the summer of 1946, the BMA presented the Bevin Plan to Somali associations and disclosed the information that a special investigative commission of the UN was soon due to visit Somalia in order to decide upon future dispositions.<sup>38</sup> The news came like a bombshell, because it anticipated Italy's formal renunciation of any rights to its former colonies – namely the quitclaim of colonial possessions – that was to be stipulated by the Peace Treaty in February 1947. Urged to organize politically, Somali clubs broadened their scope and purpose so as to mobilize more widespread support. They were soon joined by an array of brand-new associations that emerged to promote the interests of a variety of other under-represented groups. Although very little archival data exists today to illustrate this trend, the rapidity with which brand-new associations were put together is telling of the importance given to this historical juncture. Recapturing the intensity and the range of these activities is thus an important endeavour. As recent work on Eritrea and Somalia's nationalist movements has illustrated, further scrutiny into postwar sociopolitical mobilization often reveals neglected, yet crucial, contributions to the 'paths towards the nation'.<sup>39</sup> But postwar activities should not be reduced only to nationalist movements because not all of the concerns that motivated Somali activists came to be associated with nationalist paths. Nonetheless, they all attempted to envision a possible future for Somalia amid the constraints and possibilities of the postwar period.

Seeking local alliances, the BMA began to work closely with the SYL. Although this cooperation was almost certainly motivated by a common interest in the Bevin Plan, it also reflected the military authorities' appreciation of the party's original features. In contrast to other groups, the SYL was founded as a youth movement, which also meant that its early members were less likely to have played an active role in the previous administration. To the BMA, this was a welcome attribute. During the early phase of occupation the BMA had in fact grown wary of Somalis who had worked for the Italian regime. The British had exiled and replaced a number of clan leaders under the Italian colonial salary-scheme for alleged insubordination and/or for assisting the enemy.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the belief that members of the SYL had had little to do with the Italian regime fit nicely with the wartime rhetoric that the BMA had chosen to use. This helped present their occupation as the inauguration of a new era of 'progress' and emancipation from fascist oppression.<sup>41</sup> It is crucial to look into this rhetoric because on the one hand it provided a source of inspiration to many Somali activists, and on the other hand, it also contributed to constructing a dualistic image of Somali politics that distinguished between the groups that conformed to the

38 The British announcement came as a surprise to Italian informers that asked Rome to confirm and clarify. Archivio Storico e Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome (ASDMAE), Ministero dell'Africa Italiana (MAI) IV Fondo Santangelo (FS) 88, 'Primo rapporto da Mogadiscio', 10 Dec. 1946.

39 J. L. Venosa, *Paths toward the Nation: Islam, Community, and Early Nationalist Mobilization in Eritrea, 1941–1961* (Athens, OH, 2014); on Somalia, see Aidid, 'Haweenku'; and Barnes 'The Somali'.

40 A. Urbano, 'Between occupation and liberation: Italian Somalia under British rule, 1941–1945', in A. Jackson, Y. Khan, and G. Singh (eds.), *An Imperial World at War: Aspects of the British Empire's War Experience, 1939–1945* (Abingdon & New York, forthcoming 2017), 30–6.

41 Dower, *The First*.



new standards of progress and ones that did not.<sup>42</sup> As a consequence of their cooperation with the BMA, the SYL came to represent a product of the modernizing process initiated by the British occupation. Accordingly, reports drafted by the military regime began to portray the SYL as a ‘progressive’ organization, ‘sincere in its desire to further the interests of the Somali people ... [and which had] to be regarded as a law abiding club’.<sup>43</sup> Its leaders – modern, ‘intelligent and quick-witted’ young Somalis – also met the standards of the new regime.<sup>44</sup>

Enjoying the BMA’s approval, the SYL was able to make the most of the opportunity offered by the UN debate. Seizing the Bevin Plan, the SYL used the idea of Greater Somalia to promote an egalitarian society, which would bear no division and discrimination based on clan ties. The association further endeavoured to politically mobilize all Somali communities by reducing the age limit of its membership. Within a few months, the organization turned from a Mogadishu-based self-help youth club into a national party with active branches scattered throughout the Somali-speaking regions.<sup>45</sup> This success was in great part due to the party’s ability to tap into some of the aspirations and dissatisfactions of young entrepreneurs and recently settled urban dwellers. In particular, the party sought to promote Somali participation in the commerce by advocating ‘a peaceful eviction’ of Arab/Yemeni traders from the economic sector.<sup>46</sup> The party’s agenda to eliminate the clan system was also met by some popular support and party affiliates occasionally refused to state their clan belonging in court cases or business transactions.<sup>47</sup> But it was the idea of Greater Somalia that enabled the party to enjoy a great deal of popularity beyond urban centres and to create ‘a popular rally call’ that brought together different priorities in the party’s agenda.<sup>48</sup>

But the rapid diffusion of the nationalist party was also materially facilitated by an increasing number of SYL members employed in the BMA. By 1946, ‘clerks [of the BMA], servants of Europeans, traders, medical dressers, members of the Somalia Gendarmerie’ figured prominently in the party’s membership.<sup>49</sup> In particular, the SYL started to recruit heavily from the Somali Gendarmerie, the new police force. In early 1947, an estimated three-quarters of policemen stationed in Mogadishu belonged to the SYL, while almost no policemen were members of other political groups.<sup>50</sup> To some extent,

42 I draw upon Terje Østebø’s discussion of the construction of a dualist image of Islam in Ethiopia: T. Østebø, ‘Islam and state relations in Ethiopia: from containment to the production of a “governmental Islam”’, *The Journal of American Academy of Religion*, 81:4 (2013), 1029–58.

43 TNA Colonial Office (CO) 537/3641, ‘Memorandum on native clubs in Somalia’, n. d.

44 TNA FO 1015/51, R. W. Mason to E. Bevin, Asmara, 26 June 1948, ref. no. 1(S/PA/36/7).

45 TNA CO 537/3641, ‘A note on native societies in the Somalilands’, 27 June 1947.

46 *Ibid*; ASDMAE MAI IV FS 87, L. Bruno-Santangelo, ‘Relazione sulla situazione generale della Somalia Italiana all’ottobre 1946’, Rome, 20 Nov. 1946.

47 TNA FO 1015/51, H. Q. East Africa Command, ‘Monthly intelligence review, no. 3’, Apr. 1947.

48 Barnes, ‘The Somali’.

49 TNA CO 537/3641, ‘Memorandum on native clubs in Somalia’, n. d.

50 TNA CO 537/3641, ‘A note on native societies in the Somalilands’, 27 June 1947. On the link between the SYL, the police and the BMA, see Castagno, ‘Somali’, 522. On southern communities’ limited representation in the police force, see L. V. Cassanelli, ‘Somali land resource issues in historical perspective’, in W. Clarke and J. Herbst (eds.), *Learning from Somalia: The Lessons of Armed Humanitarian Intervention* (Boulder, CO, 1997), 70.

the BMA worried about the 'disquieting' popularity of the party in the police force, because they feared the possibility that the Somali Gendarmerie 'might not oppose an agreed demonstration by the Somali Youth [League]'.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, at this stage, the BMA favoured the employment of SYL members in the military regime because it provided 'a material source of help' to British chronic problems of personnel shortage in Somalia.<sup>52</sup> British preferential treatment of the SYL contributed to the shaping of the idea, frequently recorded by the UN commission, that the SYL worked in collusion with the BMA.<sup>53</sup> This perception remained vivid despite the fact that the SYL had withdrawn support from a British mandate for Somalia by the end of 1947.<sup>54</sup>

While the SYL made good use of their position within the BMA to expand across Somali-speaking regions, the other larger association at the time, the PBU, struggled to put together a political agenda that would catalyze support on a broader scale. In 1946, the association had its headquarters in a *makaja in via Roma* in the Xamar Weyne neighbourhood of Mogadishu and relied on the proceedings of a trading textile company.<sup>55</sup> In the capital, the association counted roughly 1,000 members recruited mainly from Abgal Somali, one of the largest communities in the area, benefitted from 'generous donations' of Arab/Yemeni communities, and had active branches in the districts of Baydhabo and Marka.<sup>56</sup> Certainly, the BMA did very little to facilitate the development of the PBU. In the eyes of the British, the PBU did not deserve assistance because it was supported 'by a number of chiefs ... mostly the disgruntled ones and the troublemakers'.<sup>57</sup> Its female members were discredited for being 'for the most part prostitutes', whilst 'many of the male members [we]re undesirables'.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the BMA disliked the PBU's popularity among the Abgal community. As the latter passed for 'the largest single tribal factor' in Mogadishu, the BMA assumed that it was also 'the largest tribal trouble making and criminal factor' in the area.<sup>59</sup> As a result, the BMA tended to conclude that although 'the alleged aims of the Jumiya [we]re identical to those of the Somali Youth [League],' the PBU was 'a reactionary movement fostered for the preservation of certain vested interests'.<sup>60</sup>

Clearly, the PBU failed to live up to the standards of progress and development of the new regime. By contrast, the SYL had appropriated British wartime rhetoric and advanced

51 TNA CO 537/3641, E. C. S. Reid to E. D. J. Scott-Fox, London, 3 Mar. 1947, ref. no. CA2a/DM/480.

52 TNA FO 1015/90, D. H. Wickham, 'Annual report on the administration of Somalia – for the year ended 31 Dec. 1946'.

53 TNA FO 1015/29, Four Power Commission of Investigation for the Former Italian Colonies, 'Volume II. Report on Somalia', 1948, 10–12 and 112–22.

54 Touval, *Somali*, 77–83. On the early years of the SYL, see also A. I. Samatar and A. I. Samatar, 'Somalis as Africa's first democrats: Premier Abdirazak H. Hussein and President Aden A. Osman', *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, 2 (2002), 15–16.

55 ASDMAE MAI IV FS 87, L. Bruno-Santangelo, 'Relazione sulla situazione generale della Somalia Italiana all'ottobre 1946', Rome, 20 Nov. 1946.

56 TNA CO 537/364, 'Memorandum on native clubs in Somalia', n. d.; TNA War Office (WO) 230/207, W. M. Donaldson, 'Somalia political intelligence report, no. 3', Mogadishu, 31 July 1947, ref. no. 3046/II/66.

57 TNA CO 537/3641, 'A note of native societies in the Somalilands', 27 June 1947.

58 TNA CO 537/3641, E. C. S. Reid to E. D. J. Scott-Fox, London, 3 Mar. 1947, ref. no. CA2a/DM/480.

59 TNA CO 537/3641, 'Memorandum on native clubs in Somalia', n. d.

60 TNA CO 537/3641, 'A note of native societies in the Somalilands', 27 June 1947.

calls for social and political change that emphasized the progressive features that the movement had prompted in Somalia.<sup>61</sup> These articulations reinforced the narrative that differentiated between the associations that had adjusted to the ‘modern times’ and the groups that had remained in the past. But this dichotomy did not only serve to classify ‘modern’ and ‘backward’ associations, it also helped define the national character of the SYL as opposed to the ‘tribal’ and ‘traditional’ features of other groups.<sup>62</sup> Commenting on the parties’ anniversary celebrations held in 1947, the Chief Civil Affairs Officer, Donaldson, made this distinction clear:

Those of the Somali Youth League ... seemed purposeful and were well organised. A large number of British officers and their wives were the only European guests invited. The ‘hosts’ were almost exclusively young men in modern-cut suits. By comparison, those of the Patriotic Beneficence Union (Jumiya) were somewhat haphazard and ill organised ... a selection of leading Italians were present ... It was also more picturesque in that there was a greater predominance of traditional Arab and Somali costume.<sup>63</sup>

Complicating the PBU’s reputation further, military authorities identified the association as responsible for the ‘Mogadishu riots’ of August 1946 when a number of protesters broke into the British headquarters and were forcibly dispersed by police fire.<sup>64</sup> Although this was most likely a protest against the rationing of food supplies and impending urban taxation, the BMA saw the demonstration as the result of anti-British activities, ‘indirectly’ linked to a series of strikes taking place at the time among Italian personnel, ‘with the purpose of lowering British prestige’.<sup>65</sup> However, there was no evidence that connections existed between these episodes and, more generally, that groups of Italians had influenced the PBU’s activities in August 1946. It was the rising anxieties of military authorities over possible rebellions and their preferential policies towards the SYL that made the PBU, and other groups, turn to former colonial rule.

## SHAPING THE *PRO-ITALIA*

Despite negotiating the quitclaim of colonial possessions for the Peace Treaty, the postwar Italian government had not given up aspirations of returning to their former colonies –

61 See the SYL statements before the UN Commission: TNA FO 1015/28, ‘CFM/D/L/47/I.C.COM Second hearing in Italian Somaliland’, Mogadishu, 20 Jan. 1948. See also the party’s statute: TNA CO 537/3641, ‘The General Commission of the Somali Youth League’, n. d. A copy of the statute is discussed in: G. Abuhakema and T. Carmichael, ‘The Somali Youth League constitution: a handwritten Arabic copy (c. 1947?) from the Ethiopian Security Forces Archives in Harär’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 4:3 (2010), 450–66.

62 TNA FO 1015/51, H. Q. East Africa Command, ‘Monthly intelligence review, no. 16’, May/June 1948; ASDMAE, Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana della Somalia (AFIS) 19/11, R. Manzini to Ministero degli Affari Esteri (MAE), Mogadishu, 6 Oct. 1948.

63 TNA WO 230/207, W. M. Donaldson, ‘Somali political intelligence report, no. 3’, Mogadishu, 31 July 1947, ref. no. 3046/II/66.

64 At least two Somalis were killed by the police. ASDMAE MAI IV FS 87, L. Bruno-Santangelo, ‘Relazione sulla situazione generale della Somalia Italiana all’ottobre 1946’, Rome, 20 Nov. 1946.

65 TNA FO 1015/27, D. H. Wickham, ‘Disorder in Mogadishu on 20 Aug 1946’, Mogadishu, 23 Aug. 1946, ref. no. 3456/23.

Eritrea, Libya, and Somalia – via forms of international mandate. The still-functioning Ministry of the Colonies, MAI, devised plans to promote Italy's position through the activities of locally recruited agents who attempted to put together political fronts in support of former colonial rule. MAI hoped this would help create a legitimate basis for Italy's colonial claims before the UN.<sup>66</sup> The creation of a web of contacts between the MAI and Somalia was sparked by the arrival of a delegation headed by a senior colonial official, Luigi Bruno Santangelo. Starting in October 1946, he managed the repatriation of civilians and prisoners of war from East Africa. During its visits, the party delegated senior Italian personnel, selected by the BMA as representative of the Italian community, to engage in a variety of propaganda activities.<sup>67</sup> These efforts reached a climax in September 1947 when Italian money financed an umbrella organization, *Conferenza per la Somalia*, to bring together seven associations. According to the UN Commission, the groups that joined the *pro-Italia* platform had 'a predominant influence in the B[a]na[a]dir and Upper Juba provinces', that is, in the districts of southern Somalia.<sup>68</sup>

In an attempt to explain the formation of the *pro-Italia* front, recent studies have directed their attention to the MAI's efforts to revive past networks of collaboration with Italian colonial rule. The argument goes that, in looking for potential partners and collaborators, Italian agents relied on the support of groups that had facilitated colonial rule in the past, such as clan and religious leaders and colonial soldiers.<sup>69</sup> However, this argument incurs the risk of taking the MAI reports on its activities in the former colonies at face value. In truth, the strategy to 'revive contacts' had little grounding in postwar Somalia. There were no fixed networks of support for Italian rule, which had been temporarily interrupted by British occupation, waiting to be reactivated. Admittedly, parts of Somali society had some interest in recovering their relations with former colonial masters. Colonial soldiers, for instance, having been disbanded following Italy's defeat in 1941, awaited payments for their war services.<sup>70</sup> But in spite of Italian attempts to mobilize these groups, they did not make a significant contribution to Italy's cause when presented to the UN.<sup>71</sup>

The associations that joined the *Conferenza per la Somalia* in September 1947 had emerged independently of their relations with the former colonial rulers. This meant that although their concerns and interests converged and intersected with the *pro-Italia* front,

66 Archivio Storico del Comune di Casale Monferrato, Casale Monferrato (ASCCM), Fondo Brusasca (FB) 71, MAI, 'Relazione sull'attività svolta dal ministero dell'Africa italiana fino al 15 ottobre 1948'.

67 TNA FO 1015/27, M. E. Thorne, 'Report on intensive Italian propaganda within Somalia', Mogadishu, 6 Jan. 1948.

68 TNA FO 1015/29, Four Power Commission of Investigation for the Former Italian Colonies, 'Volume II. Report on Somalia', 1948, 19. In the 1950s, these were the provinces of *Alto Giuba*, Banaadir, *Basso Giuba*, *Uebi Scebeli*. See Figure 1.

69 A. M. Morone, 'Brusasca l'africano', in L. Mantovani (ed.), *Giuseppe Brusasca e gli inizi della repubblica: atti del convegno di studi 27 Maggio 2006* (Chivasso, 2009), 42; Morone, *L'ultima*, 22.

70 TNA FO 1015/31, E. Olivieri, 'Liquidazione competenze ex ascari, loro spettanti alla data di occupazione della Somalia Italiana', Mogadishu, 9 Feb. 1947.

71 On the Italian government's attempts to reach out to former soldiers: Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome (ACS) Ministero dell'Africa Italiana (MAI) 2025, G. Brusasca, 'Messaggio alle popolazioni della Libia, dell'Eritrea e della Somalia', Rome, 28 June 1947. Yet, the *Associazione Militari ex-Combattenti della Somalia* did not join the Conferenza per la Somalia: TNA FO 1015/28, 'C.F.M./D/L/47/L.C.COM Fifth hearing in Italian Somaliland', Mogadishu, 20 Jan. 1948.

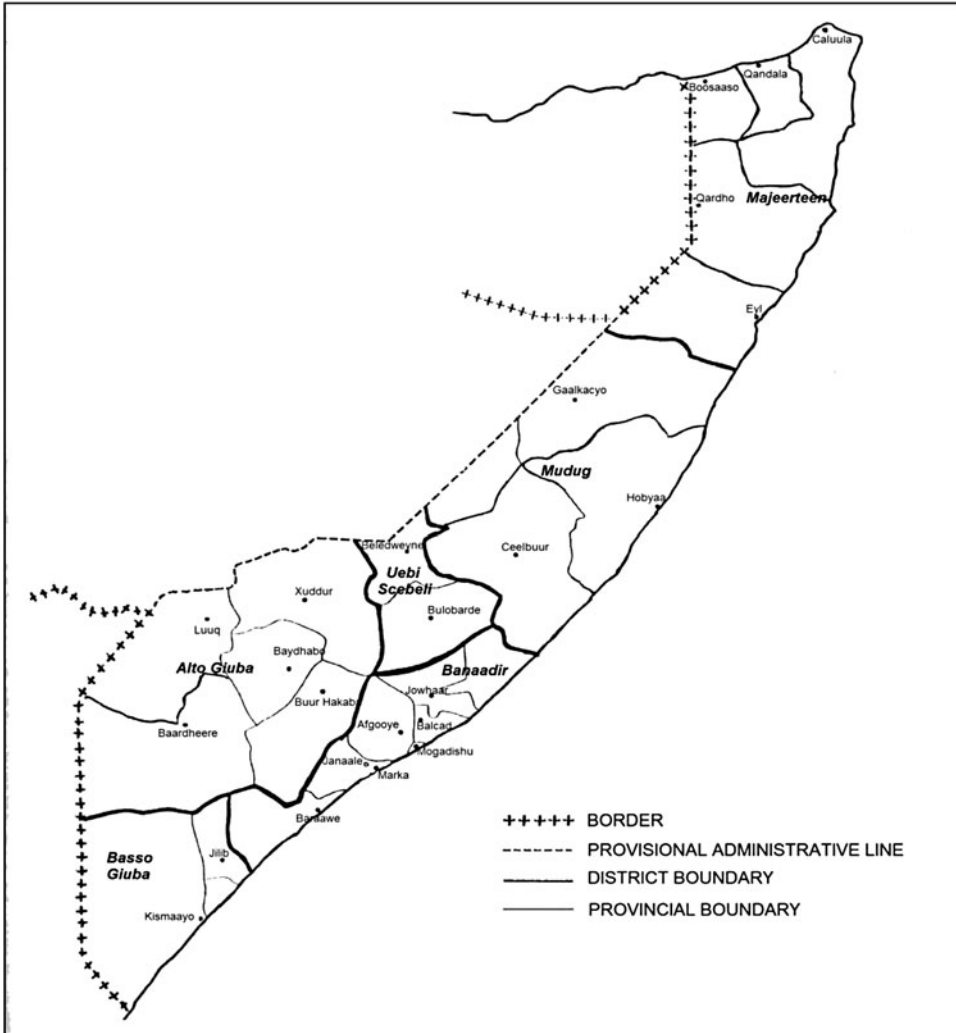


Fig. 1. Administrative Map of Somalia, 1953. Source: Compiled from Istituto Centrale di Statistica, *Censimento della Popolazione Italiana e Straniera della Somalia* (Rome, 1958).

they did not necessarily coincide with the colonial aspirations of the defeated Italians. Mohamed Hassan Gure, secretary of the Union of Africans in Somalia, made this point clear to the UN Commission in 1948. Questioned about the nature of their support for Italy, the activist explained that when they had decided to organize politically they ‘did not think ... to have Italy’ as administrative power but ‘thought [of their] own interest’.<sup>72</sup> The reasons that motivated Mohamed Hassan Gure and others to side with Italy were thus contingent on the postwar context.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>72</sup> TNA FO 1015/28, ‘CFM/D/L/47/I.C.COM. Eleventh hearing in Italian Somaliland’, Mogadishu, 23 Jan. 1948.

<sup>73</sup> ASCCM FB 33, G. Bernardelli to MAI, Rome, 24 Feb. 1948.

Above all, the process of political alignment enforced by the visit of the UN Commission was compromised and monopolized by British and Italian antagonism in the Horn of Africa. These were hostilities that dated back to wartime rivalries. In the early 1940s, the Allied rhetoric had presented the occupation of Italian colonies as part of the liberation campaign and official publications of the British government had openly condemned Italy's rule in Somalia.<sup>74</sup> By the end of 1946, the MAI returned the favour and instructed agents in the former colony to compile 'materials' – such as data on economic productivity – that would document British misrule before the UN.<sup>75</sup> Comparisons between British and Italian rules were also debated in print media in Italy and the United Kingdom.<sup>76</sup> In an attempt to defend their imperial reputation, the BMA distributed guideline questionnaires to Somali associations that specifically asked their delegates to compare British and Italian administrations to the UN.<sup>77</sup>

Seen from this perspective, the question of Somalia's future was reduced to a choice between former colonial rule and military occupation. Somali associations were asked to frame their aspirations accordingly. This left the delegates to the UN with few options. As Sheck Mohamud, of the *Conferenza per la Somalia*, pointed out:

We were hating the Italian government, and were saying may God bring the British Administration ... [that we thought] was a justice giver and peacemaker ... [but] when they had been here for six months they started to loot our property and arrest our people ... when we saw everything was upside down we were hoping God to bring the Italian Administration back.<sup>78</sup>

As the quote suggests, backing Italy somehow offered an alternative to the BMA and the grievances associated with the military occupation. The significance of this alternative should not be underestimated, especially in the context of such a power vacuum and the ever-growing uncertainty over future sovereignty. This situation particularly concerned areas that had been affected by Italy's territorial adjustments and whose future was yet to be settled. This was the case in Qalafo, a settlement of semi-sedentary communities located on the Shebelle River in modern Ethiopia. As a contested boundary area, disputes among different powers were not new to the district. Throughout the 1920s, Italy's efforts to expand their occupation clashed with Ethiopia's attempts to impose tributes on local commerce.<sup>79</sup> With Italy's occupation of Ethiopia in the mid-1930s, Qalafo was at first included in the Italian colony and, in 1941, came to be placed under temporary British rule.

In areas like the Qalafo district, those who felt compromised by the recent past had good reason to fear retribution in the future. Consider the figure of the legendary Sultan Olol

74 See Dower, *The First*.

75 ASDMAE MAI IV FS 88, L. Bruno Santangelo, 'Per la Somalia', n. d.

76 See, for instance, the discussions that followed the publication of a 'letter to the editor' signed by an Italian journalist in *The Times* in December 1946 and published in *Affrica: Rivista Mensile di Interessi Coloniali* 1947 (II:1).

77 TNA FO 1015/28, 'C.F. M./D/L/47/I.C.COM. Fifteenth hearing in Italian Somaliland', Mogadishu, 24 Jan. 1948.

78 TNA FO 1015/28, 'C.F. M./D/L/47/I.C.COM. Sixteenth hearing in Italian Somaliland', Mogadishu, 4 Feb. 1948.

79 A. Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa orientale: la conquista dell'impero* (Bari, 1979), 508–9.

Dinle of the Ajuuraan clan. In the 1920s, the sultan accepted Italy's protection and used colonial arms and ammunition to prevail in a dynastic dispute for local hegemony with Sultan Hamed Badil.<sup>80</sup> In the 1930s, he led an armed band in Italy's campaign against Ethiopia and was awarded military decorations by the Italian regime as a result.<sup>81</sup> With Italy's defeat, Olol Dinle's position was bound to change dramatically and, after initial attempts to resist British occupation, the sultan gave himself up to the BMA. Considered 'an able and dangerous man', Olol Dinle was moved to a prison in Mogadishu because his 'prestige as a guerrilla leader would enable him to raise following from tribes [in southern Ogaden]'.<sup>82</sup> When returned to Qalafo in 1947, Olol Dinle found the possibility of the area being placed under Ethiopia's sovereignty discomfiting. This uncertainty offered Olol Dinle little option but to renew his allegiance to Italy and participate in the dispute over Somalia's future.<sup>83</sup>

As the visit of the UN approached, support for Italy also granted access to a series of resources that would enhance grass-roots activism. Urging to make their aspirations known to the Four Powers' delegates, the UN called for Somali communities to organize politically. As the UN had also raised the possibility of self-government and independence for Somalia, the visit of the Commission was certainly a welcome opportunity. At the same time, some pragmatic issues arose as to how to better prepare for the occasion. There was no tradition of prewar organized political activism in Somalia. The series of self-help movements that emerged in the 1940s were not based on consolidated party structures that would further the mobilization of communities on a large scale. Getting hold of some kind of structural support was therefore crucial. Because the BMA provided leasing contracts and authorizations for public gatherings, meetings and processions, the backing of the British administration was clearly important. But, as MAI's agents understood all too well, the Italians also possessed an array of equipment that could facilitate political campaigning. This included technical support such as the provision of printing facilities, venues for political gatherings, vehicles, and fuels – the latter particularly well received given wartime shortages – but also funds for political campaigns and the distribution of so-called 'lucrative donations' to individual activists.<sup>84</sup>

Most likely, it was the Mayor of Mogadishu, Vincenzo Calzia, who had coordinated these activities in Somalia, while the MAI had financed the propaganda drive through money transfers to private companies, notably the electricity supplier De Vincenzi.<sup>85</sup> The efforts to create alliances with Somali communities reflected the broader policy of the postwar Italian government. By mid-1947, Italian officials had made a series of

80 Interview with A. M. (pseudonym at interviewee's request), Rome, 15 Mar. 2008. ASDMAE Somalia 89.9, Scarpa, Baydhabo, 17 Oct. 1922, no. 694. See also, R. Graziani, *Il fronte sud* (Milano, 1938), 48–50.

81 Del Boca, *La conquista*, 508–9.

82 TNA WO 230/7, D. G. Daniels, 'Ugas Olol Dinle', Mogadishu, 18 Sept. 1942, ref. no. 1706/5.

83 TNA FO 1015/51, H. Q. East Africa Command, 'Monthly intelligence review, no. 17', July 1947.

84 ASDMAE AFIS 19/11, MAE to Mogadishu, 11 Sept. 1948.

85 Other former colonial servants involved in these activities were Baschieri, Biase and Occhipinti. TNA FO 1015/27, M. E. Thorne, 'Report on intensive Italian propaganda within Somalia', Mogadishu, 6 Jan. 1948; ASCCM FB 33, R. Manzini, 'Funzionari italiani in Somalia', Mogadishu, 30 July 1948, no. 1030; ASDMAE AFIS 19/11, MAE to Mogadishu, 11 Sept. 1948.

campaign promises in the media to sponsor a possible return of Italy to Somalia. These included the commitment to establish a democratic regime based on 'cooperation and equality between Italians and Somalis', and to proclaim a general amnesty for the crimes committed during the BMA.<sup>86</sup> Building upon this policy, Italy's agents began to tour Somalia in order to directly come into contact with leading Somali figures, such as political activists and policemen, to promise future rewards in return of their backing before the UN, and to offer financial support.<sup>87</sup> In spite of this attention to local politics, Italy's agents had a limited interest in Somali associations and expressed no preference for any particular group to rise above the rest. Their intention was to converge the activities of all Somali associations 'towards one single goal: [Italy's] interest.'<sup>88</sup> It was the response of Somali activists to the MAI initiatives that changed the political scenario.

Unsurprisingly, of the various associations active at the time, the PBU was the first to engage with the Italians. Marginalized by the BMA and overwhelmed by the rise of the SYL, the association came to a dead end by the final months of 1946 and reduced its activities to charity and assistance to the poor.<sup>89</sup> Italy's efforts to establish local alliances represented an opportunity to break free from the political impasse and to antagonize the SYL. Within a few months, the PBU's Secretary Islao Mahadalle Mohamed – a translator employed by an Italian judge, but largely unknown to MAI circles – became a key figure in the *pro-Italia* movement. He was both a coordinator of the *Conferenza per la Somalia* and a leading delegate when interacting with the UN.<sup>90</sup>

The most noticeable result of this interaction was a steady increase of *pro-Italia* propaganda activities. Equally important were the changes in power relations among Somali and Italian communities in the former colony. Engaging with the MAI's initiatives, *pro-Italia* activists were able to seize and influence means of communication that had been the exclusive domain of the Italian community. This concerned the local media in particular. After the war, Italian newspapers began to promote Italy's renewed responsibility to their 'civilizing mission' in Africa.<sup>91</sup> Somali activists appealed to the new 'enlightened' principles of the Italian government and demanded Italian-controlled local media revise their targeted audience to make space for Somali voices. Thus, Radio Rome began to broadcast in Somali, the local periodical paper *Il Popolo* published activists' articles that debated the legitimacy of Italy's claims over its former colonies, and the printing house at the

86 ACS MAI 2025, 'L'Italia in Africa in un'intervista di De Gasperi', *Il Popolo: Giornale del Mattino* (Firenze), 9 Apr. 1947; ACS MAI 2025, G. Brusasca, 'Messaggio alle popolazioni della Libia, dell'Eritrea e della Somalia', Rome, 28 June 1947.

87 TNA FO 1015/27, Inspector Daud Mohamed 'Statement', Mogadishu, 23 Dec. 1947; ASCCM FB 33, R. Manzini, 'Radiotrasmissioni per la Somalia', Mogadishu, 30 July 1948, no. 1031.

88 ASDMAE AFIS 19/11, MAE to Mogadishu, 11 Sept. 1948.

89 TNA FO 1015/51, H. Q. East Africa Command, 'Monthly intelligence review, no. 3', Apr. 1947.

90 ASDMAE MAI IV FS 87, L. Bruno-Santangelo, 'Relazione sulla situazione generale della Somalia Italiana all'ottobre 1946', Rome, 20 Nov. 1946; TNA FO 1015/27, V. Calzia, Letter to Islao Mahadalle Mohamed, Mogadishu, 26 Dec. 1947; TNA FO 1015/28, 'CFM/D/L/47/I.C.COM. Sixteenth hearing in Italian Somaliland', Mogadishu, 4 Feb. 1948.

91 TNA WO 230/207, W. M. Donaldson, 'Somalia political intelligence report, no. 3', Mogadishu, 31 July 1947, ref. no. 3046/III/66. See also, ASCCM FB 20, G. Brusasca, 'Messaggio alla popolazioni somale', n. d.; TNA FO 1015/27, G. Brusasca, 'Messaggio ai somali dal governo italiano', Appendix F.



Catholic mission in Mogadishu produced leaflets and posters for their campaign.<sup>92</sup> If this front easily married the anti-British tones of Italian propaganda that equated wartime socioeconomic impoverishment with the BMA, it also became clear that it did not simply reproduce the MAI's advertising. For example, when military authorities searched the *Conferenza per la Somalia*'s headquarters to confiscate anti-British publications, they were surprised to find materials produced without the 'approval' of Italian agents.<sup>93</sup>

Another result of this cooperation was the expansion of the number of associations that joined the *Conferenza per la Somalia*. By the summer of 1947, these were able to increase their membership, often at the expense of the SYL.<sup>94</sup> Although it seems likely that the MAI dispensed considerable sums of money to these associations, Italy's financial support is not enough to explain the progress of the *pro-Italia* phenomenon. Italian officials themselves had several doubts of the extent to which the distribution of money, as opposed to 'political arguments', brought about positive results.<sup>95</sup> Facilitated by the Italians, their progress often entangled with different sets of dynamics. The area of Qalafo is again a case in point. During Olol Dinle's imprisonment in Mogadishu, the SYL had managed to open a few party branches in the area. When Olol Dinle was released from prison and opened up a branch of the PBU in 1947, the SYL encouraged local communities to disregard the sultan's authority and shift their loyalties to the emerging party. According to BMA intelligence reports, the hostile SYL attitude towards the sultan stemmed from the party's proposition to overcome the clan system and clan authorities.<sup>96</sup> At the same time, the controversy became an occasion to revive older disputes between Sultans Olol Dinle and Hamed Badil, whose followers seemed to support the SYL branch in Qalafo.<sup>97</sup> Repeated clashes between the sultan's supporters and SYL members occurred, resulting in several casualties, including the injury of Olol Dinle during one of these conflicts.<sup>98</sup> In September 1947, Olol Dinle directly confronted the President of the SYL, Haji Mohamed Hussein, who travelled all the way from Mogadishu to face the situation. Summoned by the British local commissioner, the leaders spent 'four whole days in fruitless discussions' before reaching an agreement.<sup>99</sup>

The Qalafo district was not alone in its experience of the disrupting effects of political alignment. Apart from the major towns where political groups had been most active, political competition between the *pro-Italia* front and the SYL developed intensively in southern Somalia, especially in the districts of Afgooye, Baydhabo, Buur Hakaba, Kismaayo,

92 TNA WO 230/207, W. M. Donaldson, 'Somalia political intelligence report, no. 3', Mogadishu, 31 July 1947, ref. no. 3046/II/66; ASCCM FB 33, R. Manzini, 'Radiotrasmissioni per la Somalia', Mogadishu, 30 July 1948, no. 1031.

93 TNA WO 230/207, W. M. Donaldson, 'Somalia political intelligence report, no. 3', Mogadishu, 31 July 1947, ref. no. 3046/II/66.

94 *Ibid.*

95 ASDMAE AFIS 19/11, R. Manzini to MAE, Mogadishu, 6 Oct. 1948.

96 TNA FO 1015/51, H. Q. East Africa Command, 'Monthly intelligence review, no. 3', Apr. 1947.

97 TNA WO 230/207, W. M. Donaldson, 'Somalia political intelligence report, no. 4', Mogadishu, 14 Oct. 1947, ref. no. 3046/II/74; Interview with M. A.

98 TNA FO 1015/140, F. W. Goodbody, 'Somalia political intelligence report', 10 Apr. 1947, ref. no. 3046/II/52.

99 TNA WO 230/207, W. M. Donaldson, 'Somalia political intelligence report, no. 4', Mogadishu, 14 Oct. 1947, ref. no. 3046/II/74.

Jowhaar, and Marka.<sup>100</sup> By the time the UN Commission visited Somalia, there were many formal complaints, charges, petitions, and counter-petitions. While the SYL accused the HDM and PBU of cooperating with former colonial masters,<sup>101</sup> associations of the *pro-Italia* front complained that the SYL abused its position of power within the BMA, particularly within the police, so as to intimidate and repress their work.<sup>102</sup> As Mohamed Hassan Gure put it:

We did not fear the authorities. We only feared [the] Somali Youth League and the military [Somali Gendarmerie] because the Government of this territory accepts only the word of the Somali Youth League . . . [for this reason we] pray God and the Four Powers that this land should not be left to the present Government.<sup>103</sup>

### THE QUESTION OF LAND AND THE IDEA OF GREATER SOMALIA

The direct accusations the *pro-Italia* made against the BMA contributed to the stigmatization of this front in the longer term. Drafting reports on political developments in Somalia, military authorities were quick to dismiss the *pro-Italia* coalition as a reflection of clan-based cleavages between agro-pastoral and pastoral communities that were inherent to Somali society. Their belief was supported by the fact that the *pro-Italia* front brought together associations that claimed to represent semi-pastoral regions and clans of southern Somalia.<sup>104</sup> Building upon the perceived inequalities among Somali communities, the BMA marked a clear-cut divide between the allegedly 'pure' Somalis, the nomadic clans of Dir, Daarood, Hawiye and Isaaq, and the 'mixed blood' and semi-agriculturist clans of the Raxanweyn. Because the BMA saw their membership as consisting 'largely of Arabs and such non-Somali tribesmen as the Ra[xanweyn] and some Bantu Riverines', this racialized discourse served to ridicule the *pro-Italia* front.<sup>105</sup> More generally, the BMA questioned their right to have a say in the international dispute over Somalia's future because they argued that these groups played 'a less specific role in the life of the community'.<sup>106</sup>

As the BMA had contacts with the British delegation to the UN Commission, it is not difficult to see how British biases affected the work and findings of the Commission.<sup>107</sup>

100 TNA WO 230/207, W. M. Donaldson, 'Somalia political intelligence report, no. 3', Mogadishu, 31 July 1947, ref. no. 046/II/66.

101 TNA FO 1015/28, 'C.F. M./D/L/47/I.C.COM. Second hearing in Italian Somaliland', Mogadishu, 20 Jan. 1948.

102 TNA WO 230/207, W. M. Donaldson, 'Somalia political intelligence report, no. 5', Mogadishu, 14 Nov. 1947, ref. no. 3046/II/80; TNA WO 230/207, W. M. Donaldson, 'Somalia political intelligence report, no. 6', Mogadishu, 19 Nov. 1947, ref. no. 3046/II/81; TNA FO 1015/28, 'C.F. M./D/L/47/I.C.COM. Eleventh hearing in Italian Somaliland', Mogadishu, 23 Jan. 1948.

103 TNA FO 1015/28, 'C. F. M./D/L/47/I.C.COM. Eleventh hearing in Italian Somaliland', Mogadishu, 23 Jan. 1948.

104 TNA FO 1015/28, 'C.F. M./D/L/47/I.C.COM. Tenth hearing in Italian Somaliland', Mogadishu, 23 Jan. 1948; TNA FO 1015/28, 'C.F. M./D/L/47/I.C.COM. Sixteenth hearing in Italian Somaliland', Mogadishu, 4 Feb. 1948.

105 TNA CO 537/3641, 'A note of native societies in the Somalilands', 27 June 1947.

106 TNA WO 230/7, Kenya Information Office, 'The Somalis', 10 Jan. 1942.

107 See the article published by the British representative to the UN Commission: F. E. Stafford, 'The ex-Italian colonies', *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)*, 25:1 (1949), 50-1.

Above all, these prejudices discriminated against *pro-Italia* voices, precluding a closer attention to their claims during hearings with the UN. Yet, a closer look into these voices sheds light on how the series of concerns that motivated different activists went beyond the dichotomization of Somali politics as construed by a tension between ‘progressive’ and ‘retrograde’, ‘modern’ and ‘tribal’ movements. Although the UN hearings were subjected to a contested and manipulative questioning, they offer a more nuanced insight into different claims and represent a unique written testimony of activists explaining their political stance.<sup>108</sup> If the coalition of associations under a *pro-Italia* front took the form of communal tension, this entangled with the more poignant question of land rights and access to fertile cultivation lands in southern Somalia. As *pro-Italia* delegates claimed representation for these regions, they took the visit of the Commission as an occasion to defend what they referred to as ‘their land’ and its economic importance from potential contenders.<sup>109</sup> From the point of view of contemporaries, the economic future of an independent Somalia lay in the development of agriculture and agricultural productions from these districts. The HDM, for example, was quite outspoken about the necessity to officially recognize land property rights, arguing that other groups ‘think they may live and stay with us, but we want them behind us recognising the land as belonging to us and not to them’.<sup>110</sup> For this reason, they emphasized the need to define who was entitled to lay claims to territorial resources in future Somalia.<sup>111</sup>

Concerns about land and access to resources were also behind the dispute between the *pro-Italia* front and the SYL, entangling with the broader question of envisioning a future independent Somalia. Among other reasons, the former opposed the national party because its agenda would purportedly pose a threat to the rights agriculturist communities enjoyed over fertile lands. As these rights were also regulated through clan and regional belonging, the SYL’s proposition to eradicate the clan system, if applied literally, would have led to a loss of land privileges. Thus, it was no surprise that while the SYL insisted on the necessity to overcome the clan system in a nation-building effort, others associations were less eager to do so. The Hidaita Al Islam, for instance, explicitly requested its members ‘to notify their identity, name, father’s name and tribe as prescribed by Moslem laws’.<sup>112</sup> Ultimately, questions of land and land rights were positioned against the SYL’s final aim, the unification of all Somali-speaking regions into a Greater Somalia. On the matter, Isloa Mahadalle Mohamed of the *Conferenza per la Somalia* pointed out that:

108 During 16 hearings, the Four Powers Commission met with representatives of 9 Somali associations, of Arab and Italian associations, and with the British chief administrator. Overall, the Commission collected evidence from 86 spokespersons, half of whom were Somalis.

109 TNA FO 1015/28, ‘C.F. M./D/L/47/I.C.COM. Tenth hearing in Italian Somaliland’, Mogadishu, 23 Jan. 1948.

110 TNA FO 1015/28, ‘C.F. M./D/L/47/I.C.COM. Fifteenth hearing in Italian Somaliland’, Mogadishu, 24 Jan. 1948.

111 TNA FO 1015/28, ‘C.F. M./D/L/47/I.C.COM. Tenth hearing in Italian Somaliland’, Mogadishu, 23 Jan. 1948; TNA FO 1015/28, ‘C.F. M./D/L/47/I.C.COM. Fifteenth hearing in Italian Somaliland’, Mogadishu, 24 Jan. 1948.

112 TNA FO 1015/28, ‘C.F. M./D/L/47/I.C.COM. Tenth hearing in Italian Somaliland’, Mogadishu, 23 Jan. 1948.

The fact is that the question of Greater Somalia is a question raised by the Somali Youth League, who were led to request it because of Foreign Minister Bevin talked about a Greater Somalia.<sup>113</sup>

While previous scholarship on Somalia has devoted a great deal of attention to the importance that the question of land played in postcolonial politics, the fact that similar issues were at the centre of political debate in the postwar period is often overlooked. These questions continued to shape Somali politics in the following decade resulting in tense relations between the SYL and the HDM, the main opposition party in the 1950s. For example, the draft of a land law in 1952 revived conflicting views over land rights, and where the League pushed for the revision of these rights, the opposition insisted on having them recognized by official legislation.<sup>114</sup> This contention also gave rise to clashes between different parties' affiliates. Most notably in 1953, SYL supporters in Mogadishu stabbed Ustad Osman Mohamed Hussein, a prominent member of the HDM and of the Territorial Council, to death.<sup>115</sup> Some time later, HDM affiliates incited violent clashes against members of the SYL in the city of Baydhabo.<sup>116</sup> Although both parties were involved in these conflicts, it was the opposition that took a beating in the 'contest'. By the time Somalia gained independence in 1960, members of the SYL occupied the majority of key governmental posts and the influence of southern associations in postcolonial politics remained marginal. As Lee Cassanelli has noted, the exclusion of southern associations from these posts can be certainly attributable to the fact that by the mid-1950s the Italians had withdrawn their support of associations that had joined the *Conferenza per la Somalia* and had openly begun to favour the SYL.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, this exclusion was also part of a policy the SYL adopted to repress the opposition.

Once the SYL gained power in 1956, its government strove to keep other parties away from parliamentary representation. First, the government ratified a law that forbade the use of clan terminology in political parties' nomenclature, a measure clearly directed against the opposition party.<sup>118</sup> Subsequently, the SYL-led government established the *shamba* tax, or tax on farming, that although technically applied to the whole country, mainly targeted the districts of southern Somalia that hosted the majority of cultivations. Enforced in 1957, it triggered numerous protests by farming communities that were harshly repressed by the police.<sup>119</sup> In the same way that the BMA had adopted a racialized discourse to ridicule the *pro-Italia* front, the SYL used the rhetoric of their fight against the clan system as a way to gloss over demands and protests coming from the opposition.

A final and decisive attempt to curb smaller associations took place just before Somalia achieved independence. Pressured by an increasing number of dissenting voices both within

113 TNA FO 1015/28, 'C.F. M./D/L/47/I.C.COM. Sixteenth hearing in Italian Somaliland', Mogadishu, 4 Feb. 1948.

114 M. Guadagni, *Xeerka beeraha: diritto fondiario somalo: le terre agricole dal regime coloniale verso la riforma socialista* (Milano, 1981), 220.

115 *Il Corriere della Somalia* (Mogadishu), 26 May 1953.

116 Interview with Mohamed Aden Sheikh, Turin, 24 Apr. 2009.

117 V. L. Cassanelli, *Hosts and Guests: A Historical Interpretation of Land Conflicts in Southern and Central Somalia*, Rift Valley Institute Research Paper 2 (2015), 23.

118 Named after the Digil and Mirifle sub-clans, the HDM changed its name to Hizbia Dastur Mustakil Somali (Somali Constitutional Independent Party).

119 TNA FO 371/125678, British Consulate to FO, Mogadishu, 16 Jan. 1957, ref. no. JG/016/2.

and without the party, the SYL-led government approved legislation to increase its power over internal affairs.<sup>120</sup> It later passed an electoral law that complicated the requirements for the presentation of electoral lists. In order to run in a certain constituency, each party had to present a list of ninety nominees, supported by 5,000 signatures and by the payment of 90,000 Somali shillings. This made electoral competition for smaller parties extremely difficult.<sup>121</sup> In some cases, ruling authorities rejected electoral lists presented by the opposition due to alleged irregularities.<sup>122</sup> As a protest against these measures, opposition parties boycotted the electoral competition and the SYL won the absolute majority of votes by default. As a result, 83 out of 90 seats of the Legislative Assembly elected in 1959, the bulk of Somalia's first independent government, were assigned to the SYL. Hence, opposition parties were, for the most part, excluded from parliamentary representation and were cut off from the debates that addressed the features of Somalia's Constitution Charter that would determine the future Somali Republic.<sup>123</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The defeat of Italian colonial rulers in Somalia by the Allied forces in 1941 inaugurated a time of hope, optimism, and opportunity for many Somalis. Future expectations were further boosted by the possibility of achieving independence, raised by international debates that developed in the UN starting in 1945. But the active involvement of the UN in arranging Somalia's future also had the unforeseen consequence of enhancing the position of the former colonial power. Encouragement and pressure for Somalis to organize politically, albeit well-intentioned, ended up favouring Italian agents that, possessing more resources and means of propaganda, were necessarily advantaged in the competition for national rule. The disrupting impact that this process had on local politics is one worth taking into account. Italian postwar colonial aspirations directly competed with British rule and interests in the area. This antagonism and the consequent efforts to set alliances with Somali communities not only exacerbated tensions among different groups but also reduced the range of discussions about future dispositions. Imperial antagonism in Somalia also contributed to shaping the spectrum of political associations by reflecting the tensions that dominated international affairs. In this way, the foremost nationalist movement, the SYL, came to symbolize the global quest for progress and modernity. On the other side, associations of the *pro-Italia* front were taken as proof of the pervasiveness of backward and traditional forces within Somalia that refused to conform to the new standards of progress. Ending up on the wrong side of this international dispute, the latter would bear the two-fold stigma of having backed the former colonial administration and, also, the former fascist power defeated during the war by Allied forces.<sup>124</sup>

120 G. A. Costanzo, *Problemi costituzionali della Somalia nella preparazione all'indipendenza* (Milano, 1962), 88. See also *Il Corriere della Somalia*, 10 Dec. 1958.

121 ASDMAE AFIS 9/4, AFIS Cabinet, 'Memorandum', Mogadishu, 14 Mar. 1959.

122 ASDMAE AFIS 9/4, 'Verbale della riunione no. 33 dell'Assemblea Legislativa', Mogadishu, 3 Nov. 1958.

123 For further details, see A. Urbano, 'Imagining the nation, crafting the state: the politics of nationalism and decolonization in Somalia (1940–60)' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2012), ch. 5, 155–98.

124 See, for instance, E. S. Pankhurst, *Ex-Italian Somaliland, etc.* (London, 1951), 238–9.

In order to shed light on the plurality of voices that arose following the change of regime one has to move beyond this simplistic binary approach to politics and political alignments in postwar Somalia. In an effort to do so, this article has built upon a growing body of literature that is devoting a renewed interest in the process of decolonization in the Horn of Africa.<sup>125</sup> At the same time, the article has also pointed to the importance of looking beyond nationalism and national movements. A scrutiny into *pro-Italia* voices illustrates how issues concerning land rights and access to resources informed political discourse and competition in postwar Somalia. Previous works have illustrated the connections between the struggle for land during the civil war in the 1990s and attempts of Siad Barre's regime to appropriate and redistribute land resources starting from the 1970s.<sup>126</sup> Looking at the postwar period helps putting this policy of 'land alienation' into a broader perspective; one that links back to pre-independence governments' attempts to exclude minority associations from national politics.

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125 Aidid, 'Haweenku'; Barnes, 'The Somali'. See also, J. Venosa, "'Serfs", civics, and social action: Islamic identity and grassroots activism during Eritrean's Tigre emancipation movement 1941-1946', *Islamic Africa*, 4:2 (2013), 165-93.

126 Cassanelli, 'Somali'; See the collection of essays in C. Besteman and L. V. Cassanelli (eds.), *The Struggle for Land in Southern Somalia: The War Behind the War* (Boulder, CO, 1996).